ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess
Vol.12

Author: **Miya Kazuki**
Illustrator: **You Shiina**

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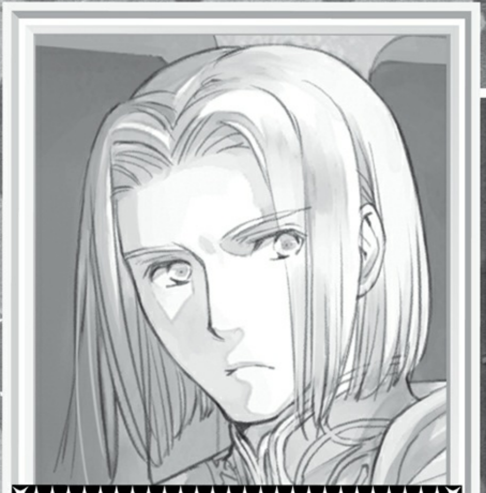
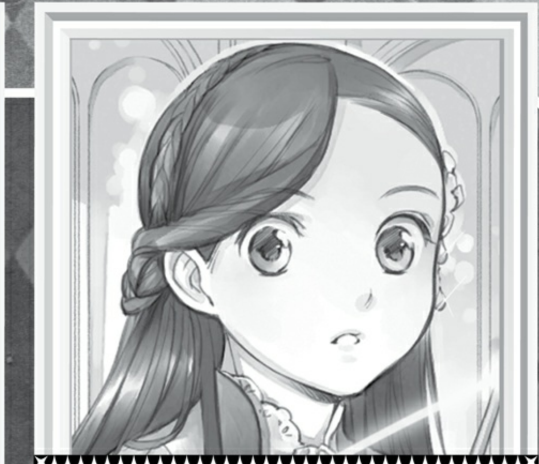
Cast of Characters



Ferdinand

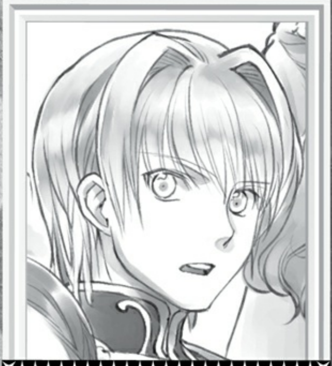
A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Soon to be engaged to Rozemyne by royal decree.



Rozemyne

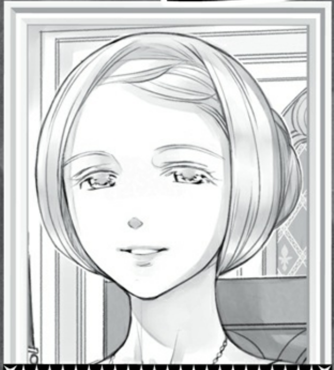
The protagonist. Divine intervention means she now looks old enough to have come of age, but she's the same on the inside. Soon to be Aub Alexandria.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



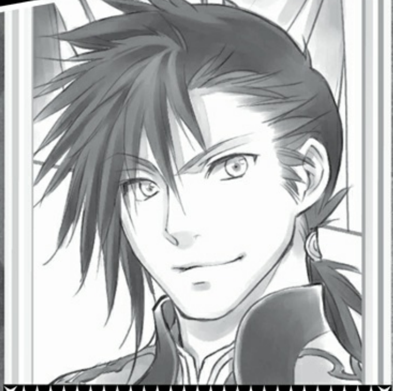
Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



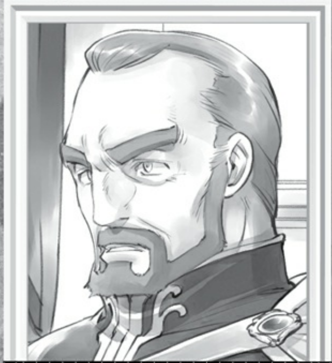
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



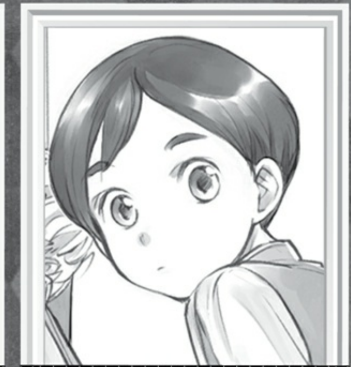
Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



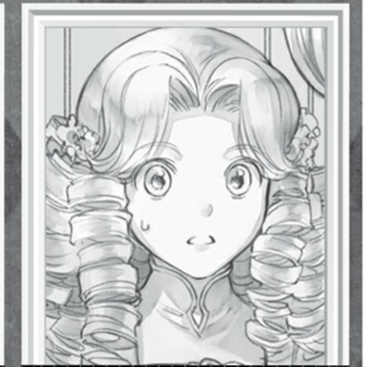
Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.



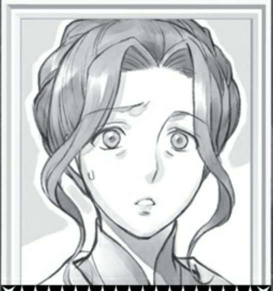
Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.

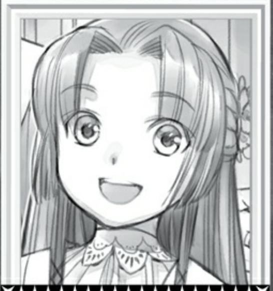
Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.

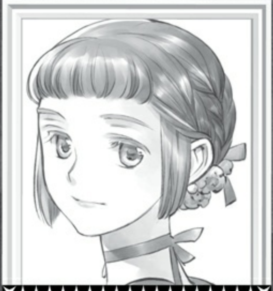
Rozemyne's Retainers



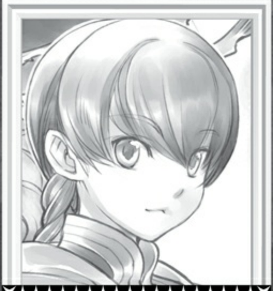
Ottilie
Head attendant. Hartmut's mother.



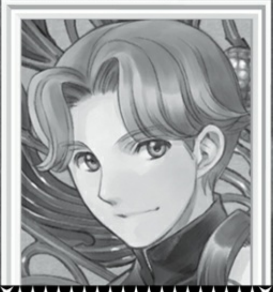
Bertilde
A first-year apprentice archattendant. Brunhilde's little sister.



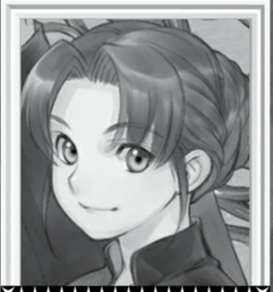
Lieseleta
Angelica's little sister and a medattendant.



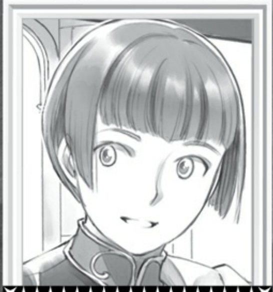
Gretia
A fifth-year apprentice medattendant. Gave her name.



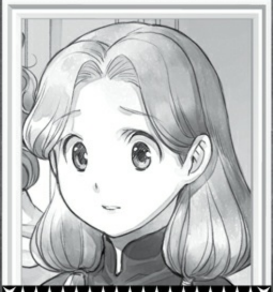
Hartmut
An archscholar and the new High Priest. Ottilie's son.



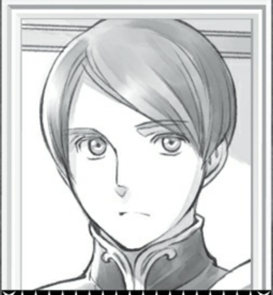
Clarissa
An archscholar. Engaged to Hartmut.



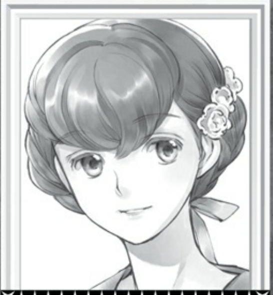
Roderick
A fourth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.



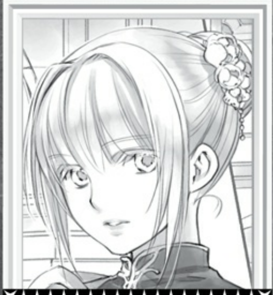
Philine
A fourth-year apprentice layscholar.



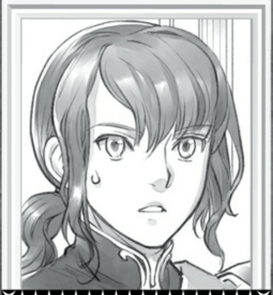
Cornelius
Karstedt's son and an archknight.



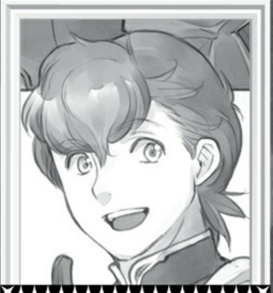
Leonore
An archknight. Engaged to Cornelius.



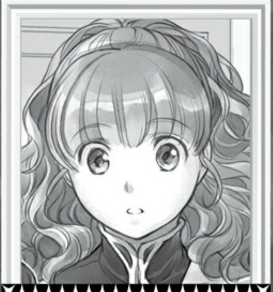
Angelica
Lieseleta's older sister and a medknight.



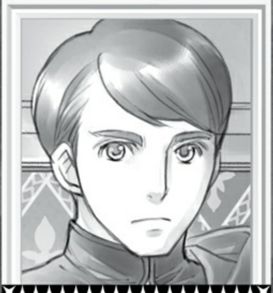
Matthias
A medknight. Gave his name.



Laurenz
A fifth-year apprentice medknight. Gave his name.



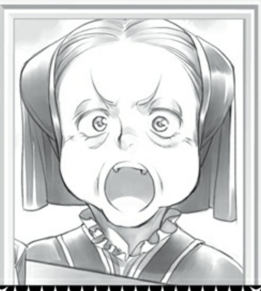
Judithe
A fifth-year apprentice medknight.



Damuel
A layknight.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Brunhilde
Rozemyne's former retainer and Sylvester's fiancée.



Rihyarda
Sylvester's archattendant.

Karstedt
·····Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira
·····Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Lamprecht
·····An archknight serving Wilfried. Karstedt's son.

Aurelia
·····Lamprecht's wife from Ahrensbach.

Siegrecht
·····Lamprecht and Aurelia's son.

Muriella
·····Rozemyne's former retainer. Gave her name to Elvira.

Kazmiar
·····Melchior's archattendant and the High Priest.

Dirk
·····A mednoble apprentice blue priest. Delia's little brother.

Eckhart
·····Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus
·····Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Lasfam
·····Ferdinand's layattendant.

Sovereign Affiliates

Eglantine
The Zent.

Anastasius······A former prince. Eglantine's husband.
Trauerqual······The previous Zent.
Magdalena······Trauerqual's third wife.
Hildebrand·····Magdalena's son.
Sigiswald········A former prince. Ralfrieda's son.
Nahelache·······Sigiswald's wife.
Adolphine·······Sigiswald's former wife.
Hirschur··········Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.
Solange············A medlibrarian of the Royal Academy.

Old Ahrensbach's Nobility

Letizia
·····Formerly a member of the Ahrensbach archducal family. The granddaughter of the previous aub, now adopted.

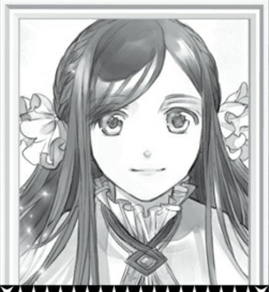
Strahl
·····Ferdinand's archknight. Formerly the knight commander.

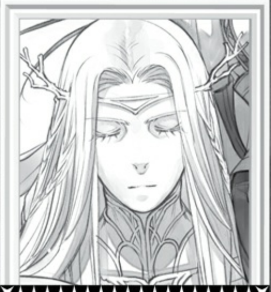
Sergius
·····Ferdinand's archattendant.

Fairseele
·····Letizia's apprentice archattendant. Strahl's daughter.

Raimund
·····Ferdinand's apprentice medscholar.

Gods


Mestionora
The Goddess of Wisdom.
Wind subordinate.


Erwaermen
A former god.
The white tree.

Gutenbergs

Benno········Head of the Plantin Company.
Mark···········Benno's right-hand man.
Lutz············A leherl of the Plantin Company.
Heidi···········An ink craftswoman. Josef's wife.
Josef···········An ink craftsman. Heidi's husband.
Horace·······An ink craftsman.
Zack············A smith. Comes up with ideas.
Johann·······A smith. Turns ideas into reality.
Dimo···········A carpenter.

Temple Associates

Fran··········Head attendant of the High Bishop's chambers.
Zahm·······Works in the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil··············In charge of the workshop.
Fritz··········In charge of the workshop.
Wilma······In charge of the orphanage.
Monika····A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola······A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Lothar······Melchior's attendant.
Gido··········An attendant working in the High Priest's chambers.
Ymir··········An attendant working in the High Priest's chambers.
Kurt··········An attendant working in the High Priest's chambers.
Delia·········A gray shrine maiden.
Konrad·····An apprentice gray priest. Philine's little brother.
Bartz·········A gray priest.

Lower City Family

Gunther
·····Myne's dad.
Effa
·····Myne's mom.
Tuuli
·····Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.
Kamil
·····Myne's little brother.

Other Lower City Associates

Freida········The guildmaster's granddaughter.
Deid········Lutz's dad.
Karla········Lutz's mom.

Criminals

Gervasio·····Formerly the king of Lanzenave.
Raublut·····Formerly the Sovereign knight commander.
Georgine···Sylvester's older sister. Deceased.
Detlinde·····Formerly a member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Alstede·····An archnoble. Detlinde's elder sister and Georgine's daughter.
Martina·····Formerly Detlinde's apprentice attendant.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Prologue

Memories

A Future Chosen

Busy Days

Entwickeln

Eglantine’s Visit

Engagement Ceremony

Proclamations as the Aub

Library and Laboratory

Back to Ehrenfest

Brewing the Base Color

Aurelia’s Situation

A Mother’s Encouragement

Temple Attendants

Meeting with the Merchants

Inauguration Attire and Closing the Library

Farewell, Ehrenfest

The Morning of the Inauguration Ceremony

The Inauguration Ceremony

Epilogue

Map of Ehrenfest Duchy

Map of Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

A Comfy Life with My Family by You Shiina

Alexandria *On a Sunny Balcony* by You Shiina

The 4th *Ascendance of a Bookworm* Character Poll!

A Message From Miya Kazuki

A Message From You Shiina

Bonus High Resolution Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

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Prologue

Though normally free of anything else, the hall containing Alexandria’s foundation now housed rows of boxes packed with magic tools and rejuvenation potions. The ancient spell about to be revived would cover the entire duchy. A dish-shaped rainbow feystone sat waiting with one of Erwaermen’s white branches stabbed into it.

“Let us begin,” Ferdinand called.

Rozemyne put both hands on the dish. It was empty at first but slowly came to resemble a water mirror as she channeled mana into it. Erwaermen’s white branch took on a rainbow hue, and a pillar of omni-elemental light shot toward the ceiling. From what Ferdinand could tell, it was being sucked into the feystones of each element orbiting the foundation.

“Ferdinand...” Rozemyne said. “This is...”

He turned his attention from the feystones to the water mirror sitting on the ground. Its surface traced the creation of the magic circle, showing first a group of nobles waving their lit schtappes above their heads, then the brightly lit Noble’s Quarter, and then the lower city.

It must be true, then—spells cast here take shape in the Mana Replenishment hall.

Indeed, their circle—and any other spells the aub cast in the foundation’s hall—grew from the castle outward. It explained why nobles of the past had never suspected that the foundation was actually located inside the temple. They would be told the truth during the Archduke Conference, and one could only imagine the chaos that would ensue.

Ferdinand drew his eyebrows into a frown. For all the troubles on the horizon, they had to focus on the present. Rozemyne needed to empty her mana reserves, else Ferdinand would not be able to dye her, and she would ultimately succumb to the divine power within her.

We have come too far to fail now.

Rozemyne no longer had a home in Ehrenfest, but it did not matter; she had obtained an entire duchy that she could shape as she pleased. Ferdinand, meanwhile, had taken advantage of a royal decree to go from being someone merely close to her to being her true family.

I will not allow the gods to toy with our lives and end our dreams before they can come true.

“Focus. The circle is not yet complete.”

They had managed to activate their spell—a mere imitation of the original used at the Royal Academy—but Ferdinand remained as tense as ever. Only time would tell whether it would actually reach completion.

The basis of their plan was sound, but they had not been able to practice. This was their only chance, and the risk of everything coming apart at the seams was far from small. Ferdinand worried that Rozemyne might collapse before she could expel the divine power rampaging through her. Maybe she would panic and drink a rejuvenation potion, and the human mana it contained would cause the ancient spell to fail. There was so much that could go wrong.

If she can endure the starvation, then Rozemyne should manage to expend the last of her mana. But even that is no guarantee.

“One of the knights just started praying!” Rozemyne exclaimed. “I guess Hartmut’s lessons went a little too far...”

Ferdinand took a moment to observe the girl peering into the water mirror. Though she remarked enthusiastically on the state of the border gates, he would not be deceived; she was a more capable noble than before and now knew exactly how to disguise her true emotions. He tried not to remember her voice or the look in her eyes when she had said she was too afraid of her mana regenerating to sleep.

Their plan would put Rozemyne on the very brink of death; even the slightest hiccup could mean her demise. Ferdinand continued to watch her while checking for the umpteenth time that everything he needed was within reach.

The gods truly are despicable.

A deep scowl creased his brow as he remembered the spiteful goddess who had put Rozemyne in these dire circumstances to begin with.

The transference ceremony had already begun when Mestionora once again descended. Ferdinand was glaring at her with as much hate as he could muster —and she, at him.

“Tell me what the gods did to Rozemyne, how to fully remove the sway of her divine power, and what means other than channeling mana into her will restore her lost memories. In return, I will give Erwaermen the antidote for the poison keeping him frozen.”

To punctuate his ultimatum, Ferdinand showed not only the antidote but also the silver tubes and daggers still on his person. He refused to cower even in the face of a goddess and would not hesitate to threaten her or continue to attack Erwaermen.

“Then have Eglantine administer the antidote while I explain.”

Determined not to let any more harm come to Erwaermen, Mestionora relinquished the information her adversary desired. She was much easier to persuade than the former god, who resembled a brick wall when it came to communication.

As it turned out, Erwaermen had thought it best for Rozemyne to become the country’s next Zent. She had reached the foundation on her own and then supplied it with mana, so he had concluded that she was as good a candidate as any.

Problems had arisen only when Erwaermen sought to welcome Mestionora back into Rozemyne’s body. The young bookworm’s charms had prevented the goddess’s return, so the gods had intervened, assaulting Rozemyne with blessings in an attempt to overcome them. But alas, the charms had not activated, and their wearer had suddenly received more divine power than a human body could endure. Only by allowing Mestionora’s descent had she managed to survive.

“Gods, what have you done...?” Ferdinand muttered. The explanation was clear but completely unacceptable. Events he had thought existed only in myths had somehow bled through into the real world.

Not even I predicted this.

Ferdinand saw the divine light seeping from Rozemyne’s body and considered it repulsive. Most attendees of the transference ceremony had gushed that she was blessed and that they envied her, but he wanted nothing more than to free her from Mestionora’s sick clutches.

“Legends say that rash blessings from the gods can sometimes be a curse...” Ferdinand mused. “To think it would apply to Rozemyne...”

“It is because the gods did not intend for this outcome that I am here,” Mestionora replied. “I can borrow the divine instruments of the primary *and* the supreme gods. Nobody else can manage the powers clashing within her.”

Ferdinand recalled the legends recorded in the temple and the Royal Academy. The primary and supreme gods had given Mestionora access to their divine instruments as protection against her father, Ewigeliebe, who wished to see her dead.

A goddess who, despite being a Wind subordinate, is in tune with all elements... How troublesome.

Ferdinand was overcome with misery. The legends spoke of ways to reverse curses brought about by the gods, but there was only so much he could do against an opponent as capable as Mestionora.

“As for erasing the divine power within her,” the goddess continued, “not much can be done while it remains so dominant. One could make her compatible with it by dyeing her body with the power of a stronger god, thereby easing her pain, but she would cease to be mortal as a result.”

Ferdinand swallowed the urge to snap at Mestionora and instead adopted the most genuine-seeming smile he could muster. He wanted to free Rozemyne from the gods’ blessings, not push her closer to becoming a fully divine being.

“I wish to return her mana to that of a mortal,” he emphasized.

“If you can almost fully drain her, then I suspect you could redye her with human mana. It would not be her original mana, but it would produce the desired result. You should not have any trouble dyeing her, I assume."

Under normal circumstances, nobles only ever dyed or poured mana into their partners or members of their family. Dyeing a complete stranger was an unpleasant and outright painful experience widely considered taboo, so any regular noble would probably have balked at the goddess's proposal.

Ferdinand, however, was no regular noble. He had grown up a feystone in the Adalgisa villa and was not averse to regulating his mana with potions and the like. Deep down, he believed that all people were fated to become feystones and that exchanges of mana were only natural.

I am not opposed to the act of redyeing Rozemyne.

Rather, he took issue with draining her mana. It was a painful process, as he had come to learn when he was stuck in Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall. He did not want to put Rozemyne through the same torture.

"Draining her mana would put her at risk of death," Ferdinand said. "Are there any other methods we could use?"

"If you would rather not redye her all at once, then you will need to wait for her original mana to return."

"Is that to say the divinely dyed mana will disappear with use?"

"Of course not. It will fade somewhat but regenerate alongside her normal mana. The pain she feels will persist until the last of the gods' power disappears, and it will not be a short process, by any means. Judging by how she has responded so far, I do not believe Myne would survive. I would advise you to redye her instead."

Ferdinand was forced to agree. The gods' elements were clashing with one another and causing all sorts of damage to Rozemyne's body. There was no time to waste.

Furthermore, Rozemyne is a victim of the Devouring.

To create his replica Grutrissheit, Ferdinand had needed a portion of Rozemyne's wisdom. Only then had he learned that those with the Devouring were unusually vulnerable to other people's mana. He had already dyed her mana organ when her clumps had put her on the verge of death, and if the gods' mana had an even greater sway on her than that of mere mortals, there was a chance it would not fade as one would normally expect.

"You have told me how to remove the divinity from Rozemyne's mana," Ferdinand said. "Now, tell me how I can restore her severed memories. There are commoners among those she has forgotten. How can she ever remember them when they cannot channel mana into her?"

Mestionora crossed her arms and let her eyes wander the space around them. Was she racking her brain or simply looking for a way to evade the question? A long moment passed before she eventually replied.

"If you know someone who shares those particular memories, they could channel their mana into her. It might repair some of the connections that were severed."

Gods could not lie—or they dared not to, for the punishment was truly severe. Nonetheless, Ferdinand could guess from Mestionora's body language that she had omitted something important. For her to have even humored the idea, there must have existed a way for Rozemyne to remember the commoners who had once meant so much to her.

It must not be something she favors.

Ferdinand was unsure whether he had time to pinpoint whatever method the goddess was trying to hide from him—or whether he was even capable of working it out on his own—but he had already made his resolve. He would do everything in his power to help restore Rozemyne's memories.

Rozemyne's experiences in the lower city had shaped her into the woman she once was. Now that she no longer remembered them, her love for her family and excitement for the future seemed to have faded. She was much colder than before and, at times, came across as completely unattached.

Though she claims I am important to her, she lacks the overwhelming enthusiasm I used to find so overbearing.

Her lack of compassion had come about not naturally but because she no longer had access to her core memories. Ferdinand resented the gods for what they had done to her and would never forgive them.

I will *restore her memories.*

“That is quite the frown, Quinta,” Mestionora said with a cruel chuckle. “You need only make her supply the foundation. She can survive without her memories but will meet an untimely demise if you do not redye her mana.”

Supplying the foundation would allow Rozemyne to expend a lot of mana over a short period, but Ferdinand was unconvinced. She did not intend to become the Zent, and it was inconceivable that Eglantine would manage to dye over divine mana and redraw the country’s borders in time for the upcoming Archduke Conference. Not that Mestionora cared to listen.

“I separated the divine mana inside Myne into its various elements, but this is only a temporary solution. As her mana regenerates, the divine power will grow stronger, and her pain will intensify. Be quick to expend it when she returns.”

The goddess then drifted through the air and came to rest above Erwaermen’s shoulder. Eglantine must have succeeded in applying the antidote because the former god was able to move his arms again.

To save Rozemyne’s life, I suppose a compromise must be made.

Mestionora intended to have Rozemyne fill the country’s foundation by any means necessary. Ferdinand did not know how urgently she expected them to act, but he would not waste another moment. He started piecing together a rough schedule while Eglantine made a vow to the Goddess of Light and the other gods.

In an unfortunate twist, supplying the foundation was not enough to fully expend the divine power within Rozemyne. It made matters worse that the divine power regenerated at a rapid pace.

It makes no sense... Does this mean Mestionora lied to me? Or was this an outcome that not even she managed to predict?

Ferdinand considered redyeing Rozemyne as she was, but the rebound was far more intense than before. He took her hand and tried to channel mana into her only to be blown back immediately. So intense was the rejection that

Rozemyne did not even notice his attempt. She really would need to be drained almost entirely before he could dye her with mortal mana.

But will that be enough?

Unable to fully cast aside his doubts, Ferdinand made arrangements for Rozemyne to drain her mana and use the divine instruments to supply her new duchy. She returned the barren land to its former splendor, and the commoners who saw her rejoiced, further cementing her reputation as the divine avatar of a goddess. They were welcome changes, but they wore Rozemyne down and did not drain as much of her mana as anticipated. She withered more by the day.

"I poured my mana into the other divine instruments, right?" Rozemyne asked. "Anyone can use them as long as they know the prayers. We could get the others to drain the instruments for me; then I could simply refill them."

A most worrying development. Rozemyne only thought so logically when she was backed into a corner. Convinced that her mana had changed enough to make further testing worthwhile, Ferdinand gave her a drop of synchronization potion...

Only for her to protest the taste. She claimed it was awfully bitter and stung her tongue—a far cry from the sweetness she had remarked on before. She would not be able to drink liquid mana when even a simple synchronization potion went down like poison. Ferdinand could only conclude that she was far from being out of mana.

Is her stamina going to last long enough for us to drain her completely?

Rozemyne's mana would regenerate—causing her divine power to grow and putting her through more pain—even if she did nothing but sleep. She had started resting only in short bursts as a result and was now reluctant to climb into bed.

A report from Lieseleta had explained that Rozemyne was hungry but could not eat. Assuming her hunger was the result of her largely depleted mana, Rozemyne would soon endure greater agony than she could ever imagine.

We have even less time than I expected.

As tensions rose, Rozemyne’s retinue started draining the divine instruments so that their lady could devote her full attention to replenishing them. It worked well, and she eventually lost enough mana to sense Ferdinand.

But her divine power is still much too great. I cannot sense her mana at all.

On the bright side, Rozemyne’s divine power soon dropped enough that she could stomach the synchronization potion. Holding on to that faint hope, Ferdinand concluded that he might soon be able to dye her mana.

Returning his attention to the present, Ferdinand realized that his hopes would soon be dashed. He kept a careful eye on Rozemyne as she responded to his observation.

“Mm... That sounds tough. I don’t want him to be miserable, but I plan to devote all my time to overseeing my library and reading books. Um, all my time not spent carrying out my duties, of course.” She spoke as casually as always, but she looked pale as a sheet.

Having sensed the gravity of their situation, Ferdinand went to grab a rejuvenation potion.

“We’re nearly done,” Rozemyne said, the intensity in her golden eyes screaming that she refused to restore her mana.

Ferdinand put his arm back down, his teeth gritted. No matter how much he thought she needed it, he could not force her to drink it against her will.

The water mirror went from showing Frenbeltag’s border gate to the one near Ehrenfest. Ferdinand made a few pleasant remarks in an attempt to lighten Rozemyne’s mood, but she could no longer speak; only a few labored gasps came out in response. She had stopped trying to disguise her anguish and clung to the feystone plate with trembling hands.

“Don’t worry...” Ferdinand discerned among the wheezing.

“Just a little longer, Rozemyne,” he said, trying to encourage her, but the journey from their most recent border gate back to the castle was anything but short. He glared impatiently at the dark ocean that had appeared in the water mirror.

Is the circle not yet complete? How much longer will this take?

Rozemyne’s head started to droop. Her strength was leaving her, and she found it unusually hard to keep touching the plate. Ferdinand wrapped an arm around her and rested a hand atop hers, keeping them pressed against the feystone.

“Rozemyne, lean against me if you must. Just keep your hands on the plate.”

Ferdinand continued to support Rozemyne, who was now only partially conscious, and channeled mana into her hands. He noticed some rebound, but she did not react.

Not long now!

No sooner had she slumped over, completely out of stamina, than the castle came into view. The magic circle was complete. Ferdinand channeled more mana into her hands and wasted no time chanting a prayer.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength...”

In the same breath, he tried to sit Rozemyne upright so that she could drink. He reached for a nearby utensil that already contained synchronization potion and continued to pray.

“Dye the mortal realm your divine color.”

In no time at all, the water mirror turned a green hue. The large-scale spell was complete, but it was too early to celebrate; Ferdinand wrenched open Rozemyne’s mouth and put the utensil in place, allowing the synchronization potion to pour down her throat. His liquid mana would come next. Dyeing her now would prevent the divine power from regenerating with her regular mana.

Be calm. You have done this countless times before.

His every movement served a purpose as he gave Rozemyne a string of potions to consume. He seemed entirely calm—as her head doctor, he was used to medicating her while she slept—but fought an intense battle in his mind. There was far too much at stake.

Time was of the essence. Ferdinand needed to dye Rozemyne before she died of mana starvation or the divine power within her started to return. It was much easier to dye her while her mana was low, but tarrying too long before administering a rejuvenation potion would mean her demise.

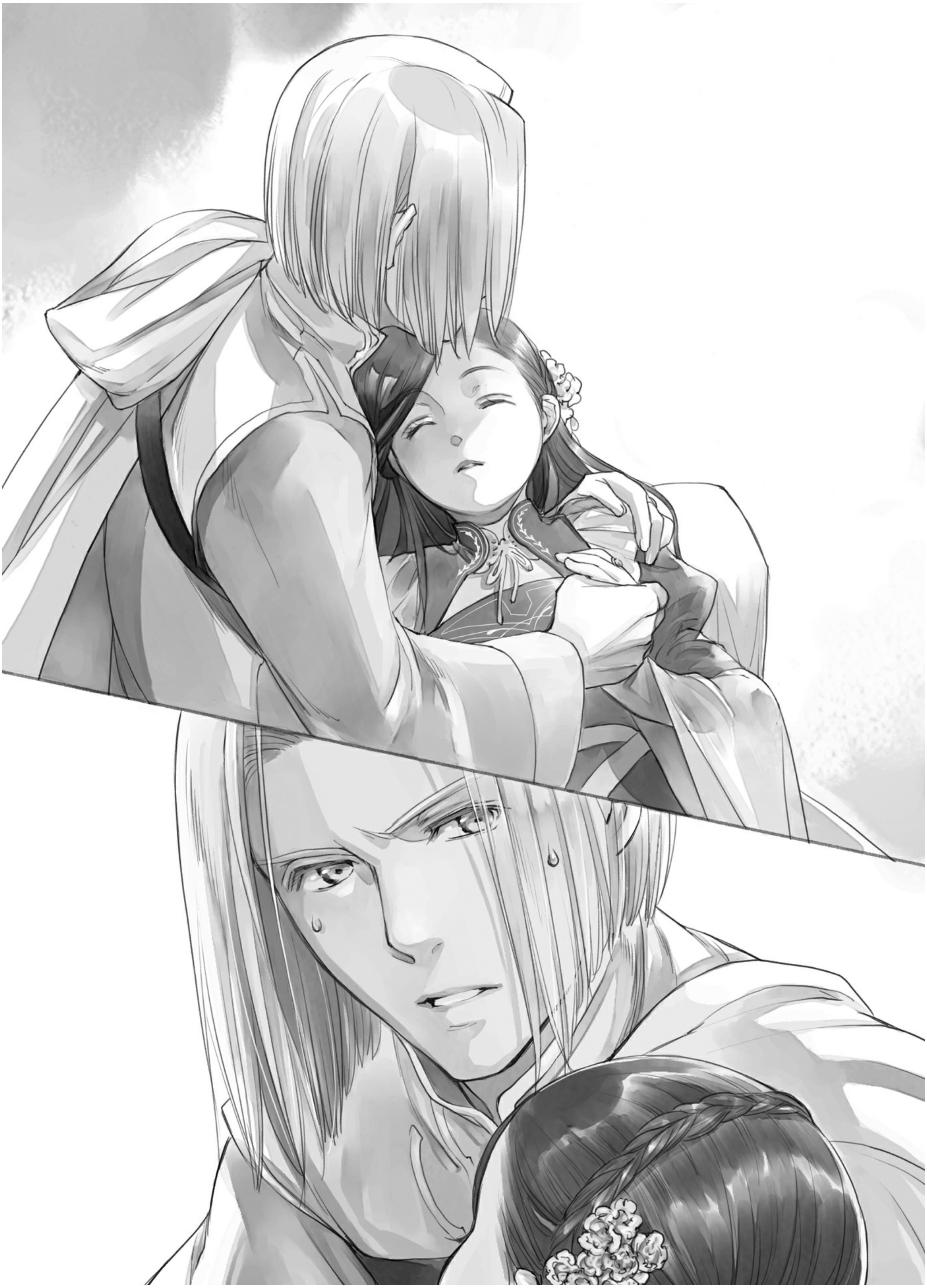
Hurry. Do not pause.

Ferdinand squeezed Rozemyne's hand and channeled more mana into her. He found it hard to breathe, and the pounding in his chest grew so loud that he could no longer measure her heartbeat. The synchronization potion must have been working because her resistance to his mana continued to weaken. He considered the time to be right and poured a rejuvenation potion down Rozemyne's throat.

Now, I need only wait for her to regain consciousness.

Ferdinand waited, but nothing happened. Even when Rozemyne returned to having a healthy amount of mana, she remained slumped against him. Cold sweat ran down his back. His throat became so dry that it hurt to swallow.

"Rozemyne! Wake up! Rozemyne!"



Ferdinand increased the amount of mana he was pouring into her. He forced it through her system to prevent any death-induced clumps from forming. There was enough resistance to cause her pain or at least discomfort, but she remained completely motionless. Each breath she took seemed more feeble than the last, and when Ferdinand tried to check her pulse, he found it was concerningly weak.

“Were we too late...?”

They had done absolutely everything they could to remove the divine power putting Rozemyne’s life at risk. Had that still not been enough? Should he have administered the rejuvenation potion sooner? It might have made more sense to force upon her the same kind of stamina rejuvenation potion he had tossed to Gervasio. Despair and regret dug their sharp talons into his mind as his thoughts ran rampant.

But it was not over yet.

Ferdinand put a hand to Rozemyne’s mouth, checking her breathing once again. Then he looked up. How many times had he been brought to the verge of death? How many times had he thought his life was over? He had sincerely believed when he was trapped in Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall that he was going to die.

Even then, when he had completely lost the will to fight, Rozemyne had pressed on. She had done everything in her power to save him, and it stood to reason that he should do exactly the same for her. He would resort to anything—even dubious records from ancient, untrustworthy sources—to wake her up again.

The gods can have their curse back.

Ferdinand made his schtappe into a pen and continued to gaze upward. “O gods, hear my cry. The Goddess of Wisdom deceived me. Rozemyne’s divine power did not fade even after she supplied Yurgenschmidt’s foundation. Is this the outcome you desire?”

Mixing in words of resentment, Ferdinand took the most wonderful magic circle he had ever seen and drew it mirrored. It was a cruel corruption of the circle that existed only to bless others—the same one Rozemyne had once used on him.

“Rozemyne has prayed to the gods more than anyone else. She, of all people, deserves to live. If you must curse someone, then curse me instead. I shall return the blessings I received. Take back the torment you have thrust upon her and grant her the blessing she deserves.”

According to the ancient records, to break the curse of a god, one needed the blessing of a god of a superior rank. To protest a curse from a subordinate, one prayed to a primary. To protest a curse from the Eternal Five, one prayed to the supreme gods. Rozemyne’s curse had many sources, so Ferdinand prayed to all elements.

To dispel a divine curse, the victim also needed a blessing they had granted another to be freely returned to them. Ferdinand would return that which Rozemyne had given him, though it would nullify only as much as he had received.

I shall use the blessing Rozemyne gave me for her sake.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies. O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm. O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. Hear my call and correct your mistake. I return to you the blessing I received so that a true one might be granted.”

The magic circle responded to his prayer, and the blessing he had once received from Rozemyne appeared on his body as light. It moved into the various feystones above the foundation, causing each one to shine in turn.

Ignoring the spectacle, Ferdinand picked up the memory-searching magic tools that would allow him to see straight into Rozemyne’s thoughts. He had intended to use them when she was conscious and well again but no longer saw a reason to wait. He would intertwine their mana, their memories, their minds, and their lives.

Once the tools were in place, Ferdinand touched their feystones together. Mana surged, and their minds synchronized. The rainbow light of the returned blessing drifted through the air, contained within the ivory walls of the foundation, and was slowly absorbed.

Only when the last of the light had vanished did it rain down anew, returning entirely to Rozemyne. Its faint yellow glow resembled the last blessing a certain apprentice shrine maiden bestowed upon Ferdinand, though the synchronization kept him from recognizing it.

Memories

Amid the darkness, my rousing sensation was a sweet taste in my mouth. I thought that I would need to ask Gretia to prepare some mouthwash when I suddenly noticed someone call my name from afar. It repeated again and again, eventually becoming recognizable.

“Is that you, Ferdinand...?”

“Gods. Respond quicker next time.”

His rush to complain seemed a little unfair. “I answered the moment your voice reached me. That said... I cannot see you. Are you nearby?” No matter where I turned, I appeared to be alone in the dark. Unease rose up inside of me.

“Be calm,” he said. “I used a magic tool to connect our minds and nothing more.”

“Oh, right. You were going to do that once you finished dyeing my mana. Does that mean we’re done?”

“I channeled mana into you and encountered almost no resistance. The process is not yet complete, but we could say that you are almost entirely dyed with my mana.”

That was good to hear. Being dyed with his mana meant being free from that accursed divine power and, for all intents and purposes, getting my old mana back. I realized that the sweet taste in my mouth must have been a synchronization potion.

“Rozemyne, I shall now share with you my memories about those dearest to you. We can hope only that it spurs you to remember them on your own. They are all commoners, so they cannot simply channel mana into you. Do your best to remember who they were to you, the person you were back then, and why they meant more to you than the library of an actual goddess. You *must* remember them.”

Ferdinand took a stern tone as though giving me an order, but something about his voice made me think he was pleading with me. He was normally so dry and monotonic that hearing the emotion in his voice made me realize his desperation.

I, too, wanted to regain my lost memories. I swore then and there that I would, no matter the cost, and then remembered that the memory tool synchronized our emotions. The last time we'd used it, I'd relived the past with more clarity than usual, but my memories and emotions had swung Ferdinand all over the place.

"This time, *I'm* going to experience *your* memories and emotions, right?" I asked.

"I am loath to do this, but yes."

Our emotions must already have synchronized; reluctance, hesitation, and resignation crashed down on me like waves. Ferdinand really must have hated the thought of me accessing his memories. It was crude of me, but I was a little bit excited to look past his stony mask.

"Let us begin," he said.

The black void suddenly transformed into the temple. It was like we had teleported. I could tell from the passing scenery that we were headed to the High Bishop's chambers. Ferdinand was so much taller than me that it was actually refreshing to see things from his perspective.

"I want to look over there," I said. Despite my best attempts to turn my head, I was restricted to seeing whatever Ferdinand was looking at.

"No. You are experiencing this memory as I once did."

Standing in front of the door was a gray priest I didn't recognize. Arno requested that we be allowed through, and it wasn't long before we were in the presence of the potbellied former High Bishop. I'd once seen him as a genial old grandpa, but now I could see the nasty glint in his eyes.

"I don't like Bezewanst, but seeing him like this is pretty nostalgic..." I mused aloud. "Oh, hey! There's me!"

A younger version of me wearing the uniform of a Gilberta Company apprentice entered the room with a man and woman I didn't recognize. I was so short, barely even reaching Ferdinand's hips. He could have covered my face with his sleeves without even needing to raise his arms.

"Holy heck, I was so tiny!" I exclaimed. "Is this really how I used to look to you? Wow! Did you ever worry about accidentally stepping on me?"

"How is *that* your first question? Good grief... Stop fixating on your height and pay more attention to the pair who entered with you. They are your parents. Your father, Gunther, works as a soldier and guarded you in Hasse. Your mother, Effa, is your personal dyer, whom you granted the title of Renaissance."

It suddenly occurred to me just how little I remembered about the lower city. I recalled the business deals and contracts I'd made with Benno and Mark but almost nothing about my family or actually living there.

Those are my real parents...?

I doubted Ferdinand was lying to me, but I couldn't believe it. I didn't have any memories to make it feel genuine. The pair stood protectively in front of me, facing down Bezewanst as he demanded that they hand me over.

"I refuse," the man said. "Myne won't be able to survive here as a servant."

"That's right," the woman added. "Even without the Devouring, Myne is very weak and sickly. She's the kind of child who collapses twice during a baptism ceremony and ends up bedridden for days with a fever. She wouldn't last in the temple."

The blood drained from my face as I braced for the worst. They were only commoners; why had they dared to oppose the High Bishop?

Do they want *to be executed?!*

I took in a sharp breath. Just as expected, Bezewanst was furious that mere commoners were defying him. He invited several more gray priests into the room and ordered them to capture me, saying that he'd execute anyone who tried to intervene. I suspected that was how I'd ended up in the temple; my supposed parents had done their best but ultimately conceded.

Or so I thought. In response to the High Bishop’s threat, the man declared that he would go to any length to protect me, then started punching and kicking the gray priests away. His sudden outburst shocked me so much that I took a nervous step back.

“It mattered not whether they were the High Bishop or a noble from another duchy—your father took on anyone who might put his precious daughter at risk,” Ferdinand said, his voice reverberating through my head. “Can you imagine my surprise when I first met your family?”

Truth be told, I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was used to Ferdinand keeping his emotions hidden, but here he was wearing them on his sleeve. His voice was tinged with both envy and nostalgia.

“I can,” I eventually said. “I mean, I’m surprised as well. He has no sense of self-preservation, does he?”

“More reason to believe he is your father,” Ferdinand chuckled. “I can see what inspired you to keep fighting for me even when everyone else told you to give up—to charge into Ahrensbach with the knights of Dunkelfelger at your heels.”

I thought seeing a person go ballistic would terrify anyone, but Ferdinand seemed to perceive it as a profound act of compassion. He was shocked to see two people disregard status to protect their daughter but also deeply approved of their actions.

So there are parents out there who would quite literally fight to protect their children...?

A separate scene overtook my vision, allowing me to glimpse another man and woman.

“This must be the Goddess of Time’s guidance...” said the man with a somewhat troubled expression. I thought he resembled an older, kinder-looking Sylvester.

“I suppose Glucklitat has his trials for us all...” added the woman. She had feathery blonde hair and a gentle face.

And these two are...?

I was gazing up at them, which meant I must have been looking through the eyes of a young Ferdinand. It lasted only a moment before we were back in the temple, but I couldn’t just pretend it hadn’t happened.

“Was that man the previous Aub Ehrenfest?” I asked.

“Focus on what is before you. We are here to recover your memories,” Ferdinand replied, clearly dodging the question. “You were just like Gunther, unable to merely sit by when those you cared about were in danger.”

“I don’t know about that,” I protested. “I think I’ve ‘sat by’ on many an occasion.”

As if on cue, the young me started Crushing the former High Bishop. My eyes kept changing color as if an iridescent film covered them, and a thin yellow mist appeared to radiate from my body. I was outraged and doing everything I could to protect my apparent parents.

“You’re the one who’s being ridiculous. Don’t you dare touch my mom and dad.”

Mom and Dad...

The words echoed in my mind. I used to say them all the time. An intense wave of nostalgia washed over me and made my chest ache, but even then, my memories felt distant.

Even as I watched my supposed parents challenge the High Bishop for my sake and the young me rampage for them, I couldn’t understand my own emotions. Resorting to violence made no sense. It would surely have been better for everyone if they’d just conceded and allowed the temple to take me.

It was much easier to empathize with Ferdinand’s feelings about the whole incident. He was moved to see me fight for my family despite being so tiny but also anxious that I was committing a crime I would never be able to recover from.

“I still can’t remember them...” I said. “I used to have a mom and dad—I understand that much—but the rest is still a mystery to me...” It was so frustrating that I could almost cry. No matter how much I wanted to remember these people, my mind refused to cooperate.

“Perhaps I should show you someone else,” Ferdinand replied.

In an instant, our surroundings transformed into the High Priest’s room. I was used to these chambers, but the furniture was positioned in a way I didn’t recognize. We were seated around a table with Ralph’s parents on our right, Mark and Benno on our left, and a blond boy I didn’t recognize across from us.

“Um, what are we looking at?” I asked.

“Do you remember all those present?”

“Everyone except the boy in front of us.”

“So you recognize Mark and Benno...”

Indeed, I did. I remembered selling them plant paper and asking them to prepare the tools I needed to make more.

“His name is Lutz,” Ferdinand explained. “His parents are sitting to our right.”

“I saw them only as Ralph’s parents. I guess that means Lutz was important to me...”

“Yes. He made paper when you could not, worked at Benno’s store, brought the orphans from the temple to the forest, and spread printing throughout Ehrenfest as a Gutenberg. He was your arms and legs within the printing industry—someone who, in your eyes, was equivalent to family.”

“Equivalent... to family?”

“Watch,” Ferdinand said, indicating Deid, who was clumsily searching for the right words. “You stood up for Lutz when he ran away from home, fed up that his parents were keeping him from following his dreams. Your wish at the time was to resolve his family’s problems. Had that proven futile, it was your backup plan for Benno to adopt him.”

“But why are *you* here?” I asked. It was bizarre to see Ferdinand involved in the problems of a commoner family.

“You were the orphanage director, but you were still too young to permit Lutz’s adoption. I agreed to provide my name in your stead. It was purely business.”

So he said, but I sensed something deeper. His experience with Myne's family had made him want to learn more about commoner relationships in general.

As the discussion proceeded, Ferdinand intently watched Karla and Deid. Lutz's parents spoke crudely and were largely unmannered, but it was clear to everyone just how much they loved their son. Well, to everyone except Lutz. Ferdinand envied the boy for being cherished so dearly but also felt exasperated that anyone could remain so obtuse.

Still, Ferdinand directed the conversation in such a way that Lutz's parents could properly explain themselves. It was thanks to him that, as the meeting advanced, Lutz went from being tense to completely at ease.

"As I told you the other day, after thinking about Lutz's abilities and my future plans for opening stores, I conclude that I would like to raise Lutz into my successor," Benno said.

From there, the conversation turned to the potential adoption. Deid was very openly opposed to the idea.

"You're good at running a business and I'd bet you're a skilled merchant," he said. "You've even got the heart to forgive all the trouble Lutz's given you. But you wouldn't be a good father."

Ferdinand was taken aback by the appraisal. He suddenly seemed more on guard against Benno and developed an even greater interest in the familial nature of commoners.

"Please explain why you think he would not be a good father. Does Benno have a bad reputation or something of the sort?"

Deid then turned to Benno. "No matter how good at your job you are, you're trying to adopt a kid not for his sake, but for your business. Nobody like that would be a good father. Parents can't think about everything as pluses and minuses. Am I wrong?"

Benno wasn't the only one who found that shocking—Ferdinand all but gasped in response. In his head, a man repeated two short phrases: "the Goddess of Time's guidance" and "for the sake of the duchy." I didn't recognize the voice, but I could guess from the resignation Ferdinand was feeling that it must have been the previous Aub Ehrenfest.

Is that to say the previous aub wasn't a good dad to Ferdinand...? I mean, he outright said that he only took Ferdinand out of the Adalgisa villa because it benefited Ehrenfest...

No one noticed Ferdinand pause as he tried to steady his breathing. We were all too focused on Deid and Benno's exchange and Lutz's tearful murmurs when he finally accepted just how much his parents cared about him.

"C'mon. We're going home, you brat."

Lutz grinned as his father gave him a light chop on the head—and once again, Ferdinand watched on in envy. In his eyes, their relationship was as dazzling as the sun. A commoner boy had enjoyed since birth a certain warmth that Ferdinand would never get to experience.

My heart ached. I'd once said to Ferdinand that the previous aub had taken him in out of necessity and that Sylvester and I needed him in much the same way. In hindsight, that must have been the last thing he had wanted to hear.

His value or whatever doesn't matter to me. I care about him unconditionally. Does he know that?

Exhausted, Ferdinand watched as his attendants cleaned the room. He then recalled the commoner girl sitting beside him and gazed down at Myne, who was still clutching the sound-blocking magic tool as instructed.

"It appears their family will do just fine," Ferdinand said to her. "As I recall, resolving the problem and returning Lutz home was your ideal solution."

"Mm-hmm," she replied. "It's perfect."

And then... Myne started weeping with joy. It was unsightly to laugh and cry so openly. Ferdinand warned her to stop—that she was acting like a slave to her emotions—but she simply replied that she was too delighted.

"Lutz, I'm so glad things worked out..."

Ferdinand gazed down at her. Despite not being directly involved, Myne seemed to feel all the same emotions as Lutz. I could sense how genuinely curious Ferdinand was that she felt so strongly about someone who wasn't even related to her by blood.

I wonder what I would need to do for—

"Rozemyne! Do you remember Lutz?"

"Guh?!"

My eyes widened, and my mind went blank. I couldn't even remember what Ferdinand was thinking.

"Sorry, uh... Come again?"

"I asked if you remember Lutz."

"No, I don't. But I must have cared about him deeply to have shed tears of pure joy."

More than that, though, I now understood that Ferdinand was deeply fixated on family and parents. I was less curious about Lutz, whom I couldn't even remember, and more interested in probing Ferdinand now that our emotions were synchronized. Saying that he was like family to me must have meant more to him than I'd ever realized.

I continued, "Perhaps because I still don't remember this Lutz person, I'm unable to empathize with the Myne we see here."

"Do you not remember him at all...?" Ferdinand asked. "Not even now that you have seen his face and heard him speak?"

"Not at all. Before, when I saw those people who were meant to be my parents, it felt like I nearly connected to something. But with Lutz, I don't feel anything in particular."

I noticed a surge of shock and concern within Ferdinand. On the one hand, he was irritated that "Lutz matters that much to her?!" On the other, he was still desperately racking his brain for memories that might help me remember.

I probably shouldn't admit that I was too focused on Ferdinand to think about anyone else. Especially when he's going to the trouble of showing me memories with Lutz.

"Perhaps we could try memories of your dream world," Ferdinand said. "You might find those easier to connect with.”

I thought that was unnecessary—my memories as Urano were already intact—but he must have proposed it for a reason. I decided to humor him, wanting to know how the other world might impact his emotional state.

It’s my living room. Aah, this takes me back...

We had gone from the High Priest’s chambers to my house back on Earth—somewhere I would never be able to return to, no matter how much I desired it.

“Since we’re here, how about we seek out some books?” I said. “Let’s check my room.”

“You never took me there, so there are no relevant memories we can visit.”

“Gaaah, what a huge blunder! Fine, the library or bookstores from before will do. Just take me somewhere with books.”

“I refuse.”

I was aching to return to all the books of my Urano days. Ferdinand, meanwhile, was glad that we didn’t have access to my room, as he thought letting me read was a waste of time. His cruelty knew no bounds.

Completely ignoring my invitation to go somewhere with books, Ferdinand approached a shelf decorated with arts and crafts and pointed at one item in particular. “This was the basis of the lace hairpins you wear, was it not? I recall your explanation.”

“It is, but... Wow. I’m surprised you remember it this well, considering that you saw it only once.”

The details of that conversation were a blur to me, but Ferdinand evidently remembered them all. It must have had something to do with the way our brains were wired. I was mulling the thought when Ferdinand tensed up a little. It was strange having such direct access to his emotions; I was so used to having to watch for the slightest twitch of his brow.

“Ferdinand, is something wrong?”

“Do you remember who made the first hairpin you sold to Benno? Do you remember for whom it was made?”

“Huh?”

I dug through my memories while he patiently awaited my answer. I remembered introducing hairpins as a new product when our production of paper started to settle down. The guildmaster had wanted a new hairpin for Freida’s baptism, and the sheer amount of money I’d made had seemed absurd at the time.

But my first hairpin... I’m really not sure why I made it.

“No,” I replied.

“To my knowledge, it was for Tuuli.”

“My hairpin craftswoman?”

“I seldom have opportunities to see her, but I was present when she delivered one of your new hairpins.”

Our surroundings changed again. We were in the orphanage director’s chambers this time, for a reason that I promptly recognized.

“This was when I received Lady Eglantine’s hairpin,” I said.

“Do you recall, then, the reason you are glaring at me with such displeasure?”

“I don’t think I would even if my memories returned.”

As he said, the Rozemyne in his memories looked guarded and especially disgruntled. Ferdinand, in turn, was displeased to see her frowning at him when he was taking time out of his insanely busy schedule to check up on an order for the royal family. He vented those frustrations by reaching out and pinching her cheek until she had tears in her eyes, revealing his immature side.

He really was lashing out!

“That is Tuuli,” Ferdinand said, indicating a girl with braided green hair. I could sense his anxiety about how the other Rozemyne would react to seeing her; she had just woken up from a jureve, and two whole years had passed since their last meeting. Seeing that she was more tense than usual, he kept one hand on his hip so he could pull out a feystone the moment her emotions burst forth and she lost control of her mana.

Rozemyne locked eyes with Tuuli. A slight smile arose on her lips, and the tension seemed to drain from her body. I could see the love and compassion in the young craftswoman's blue eyes—the same love and compassion I'd seen from my supposed parents.

I remember that warmth...

"I have humbly brought a hairpin for you as well, Lady Rozemyne."

Tuuli had made a spring hairpin for me during my two-year slumber. Rozemyne smiled as warmly as if she had just seen a book and asked for some assistance with putting it on.

For a moment, Tuuli gazed cautiously at Ferdinand. Then she removed the hairpin Rozemyne was wearing and tenderly replaced it with the new one. Her hands were so kind and gentle as she inserted the ornament into my hair and neatened the last few errant strands.

"Does it suit me?" Rozemyne asked.

"I made it to suit you, Lady Rozemyne. It looks perfect."

Rozemyne and Tuuli exchanged a look, then smiled. I could tell from their expressions how much they treasured the brief moment they were getting to spend together.

Aah, I don't want this to end.

A single thought wandered through my mind, though I couldn't tell whether it belonged to Ferdinand or me—he was as taken with the scene playing out before us as I was. It pulled at his heartstrings to see Rozemyne keep trying to reach out to her loved ones, from whom she was separated, and to see her family do everything they could to close the distance between them. It wasn't his fault—our hands had unfortunately been tied—but he was overwhelmed with regret for having torn me from them and allowing me to lose two years of my life.

His remorse feels so extreme—like there's an immense, immovable weight on his conscience.

I'd never expected him to feel so guilty. I wanted to tell him to relax and that he hadn’t done anything wrong... but I paused. As it stood, I didn’t have the whole picture; I could think only of all the times he’d saved me. I wondered if my opinion would change when I regained access to the memories of these people whom he claimed were my family members, so I swallowed my words of consolation and said something else instead.

“Ferdinand, do *you* remember why I made my first hairpin?”

“Benno told me you made it for the sake of your elder sister, Tuuli. Your entire family created it together to celebrate her baptism ceremony.”

As if on cue, our surroundings changed, and we were taken back to the High Priest’s chamber. Mark and Benno were looking straight at us.

“How is this?” Benno asked, opening a box containing the hairpin I’d worn for my noble baptism. “As requested, we used the finest thread we had access to. Hairpins of this style were first introduced when a child made one for her elder sister’s baptism and then sold the design to my store. We think it would be perfect for celebrating Lady Rozemyne’s baptism ceremony.”

“Oh...?”

Ferdinand, too, considered it an ideal present for me, as I was studying so hard to become a proper noble. He was right, of course, because I remembered crying when I’d received it. I just couldn’t remember *why* I’d cried.

Benno continued, “Tuuli, who has experience making hairpins for apprentice shrine maidens, worked with her mother to weave the thread, while her father carved the stick out of wood. Lady Rozemyne will surely be overjoyed to receive it.” He gave Ferdinand the same unfaltering smile he wore when he was certain of his victory.

In the blink of an eye, Benno vanished, and we were back in my old living room.

“Do you remember?” Ferdinand asked. “How you made the hairpins, I mean. Given your single-minded obsession with books, I assume you grew tired of creating such ornaments just as quickly as you gave up on embroidery. It always concerns me when you launch into a new endeavor on a whim, so your parents and elder sister must have been anxious when you proposed your hairpins. Or perhaps they gleefully cooperated from the very beginning. They are your family, after all."

A vague memory arose in the back of my mind. I asked someone for yarn and then saw my hands start crocheting with a precisely carved crochet hook. I sensed people around me, though they appeared only as vague shapes.

"They did. Or at least, I *think* they did. I can see someone touching the finished petals, though I can't make out their identity. Someone complimented my work and called it amazing... but who?"

Ferdinand must have found that promising because hope suddenly swelled in his chest. "You must be thinking of your family." His eyes turned to a basket sitting nearby. "Perhaps you wove together as well."

My mom from my Urano days had always rushed to start new projects and then lost interest partway through, leaving me to finish them all on my own. These figures from my commoner days, however, must have worked alongside me. I grasped at whatever fragments I could, desperately trying to remember them.

"Ink, hide glue, rinsham, candles, soap—you could never have made all these things on your own. Who nursed you back to health each time you caught a fever? Who supported you when you were too sick to go outside? You must remember the lectures you received from those who were worried about you."

Several voices echoed through my mind.

"Come on, Myne!"

"Would you please sit still?"

"Myne, what are you doing?!"

"C'mon, let's go!"

I recognized the voices but couldn't put names to them. They continued to speak over one another, and the clamor became so intense that my head started to ache.

"They were so mad and so worried... I couldn't help out at all, since I was so sickly and weak, but... That's why they were always there for me." My eyes grew hot, and tears blurred my vision; I could tell these memories were precious to me. “And yet... I can’t remember ever caring for them. Isn’t that heartless? Books are my entire world. The only thing I care about more is, well... you, Ferdinand.”

“Yes, because I am the only one who has channeled mana into you since Mestionora severed your memories. Your love for your family runs deep enough to drown an ocean.”

I could feel a storm of emotions stirring within Ferdinand—elation, resignation, sorrow, and a wish for me to regain my lost memories as soon as I could. His anxiety made me feel anxious too.

Ferdinand continued, “It was only when I synchronized with you and peered into your memories that I encountered the sort of compassion you have for your family. It was unlike anything I felt for Sylvester and our father. If anyone is heartless, I am. Your emotions are too strong and sincere for the term to apply to you.”

We were suddenly transported to my dining table, where my mom was eating in front of me. I could see freshly cooked rice, natto, miso soup, teriyaki yellowtail, meat and potatoes, mixed vegetables, and various pickled goods. It was the same feast Ferdinand saw when he peered into my memories.

“Despite never having eaten these dishes, I am still nostalgic for them...” Ferdinand mused.

“Do they remind you of your own mom’s cooking?”

“No, I mean because I synchronized with you. I am more nostalgic for the meals you devised in Ehrenfest... as I discovered while stuck in Ahrensbach.”

Was that really a compliment? Now that we were linked, I could sense that he was just glad to eat food that definitely hadn’t been poisoned. I’d thought he was a genuine gourmand—a lover of tasty meals—but his true standards were shockingly low.

“Ferdinand, what kind of life must you have lived to consider unpoisoned food a luxury...?”

The meal in front of us changed from Japanese food to something that resembled roast beef. Ferdinand started to choke, desperately fighting back the urge to vomit, and the pain he was experiencing shot through me as well. A woman with blonde hair, cold green eyes, and a cruel smile simply looked on. She brought to mind an older Detlinde.

“Fool...” Ferdinand spat. The woman vanished, and we returned to sitting with my mom. “Choose your words carefully lest you see too much. Memories of that nature will only obstruct you from remembering your family.” I could guess from the hatred swirling within him that the scene I’d just witnessed had once been an everyday occurrence for him.

“I imagine that woman was Veronica,” I said. “You might not agree, but I think that memory was worth seeing, even if only for a moment. That glimpse of your past makes me realize just how fortunate I was.”

“Yes, that is correct,” Ferdinand replied at length. “You truly were cherished and raised with love.”

My mom from my Urano days loved me—I could see it in her eyes. My heart pulsed with joy as I thought about all the care and consideration I’d received growing up.

Because I was seeing this memory through Ferdinand, who had witnessed it while peering into my mind, I sensed the uncertainty that had washed over him upon seeing a mother who openly and unconditionally cared about her child. I, meanwhile, had felt regret, remorse, nostalgia... and love.

Indeed, of all my discordant emotions, love reigned supreme. I thought about my family on Earth, whom I would never see again, and the family I was spending time with, and a single thought appeared in my mind.

I really do love them all.

“Ferdinand... I can’t remember my family from before, but I think my feelings for them are coming back. They really are precious to me. I adore them all so much, but... I just don’t know them.”

We were so close to a breakthrough. I could see their faces, hear their voices, and even repeat their names, but I couldn’t access my lost memories. A thin membrane stopped me from remembering my time spent with those I cared about.

"I didn't take them for granted, right?" I asked. "Please, tell me I showed everyone how much I cared about them."

Ferdinand winced in pain, and our environment changed once again.

We're back in the High Priest's chambers. Father and Sylvester are here, but... when is this?

As I tried to figure it out, Arno announced the arrival of some visitors. Ferdinand said the usual greeting for guests, at which point Fran led my family into the room. My dad and Tuuli were holding hands, while my mom carried a baby in a sling.

"Myne!"

Tuuli pulled away from Dad and, with a dazzling smile, ran over to Myne, who was wearing the robes of an apprentice blue shrine maiden. She threw her arms around the old me, then pulled away and started checking that I wasn't hurt. It came so naturally to her that I could guess she had done it all the time.

"Dad was super hurt and came to get us with a scary look on his face. He even said Mom had to bring Kamil to the temple, so I was really scared something had happened to you, Myne. I'm so glad you're safe."

Tuuli sounded genuinely relieved that her younger sister was okay. Her love for me was resonating with mine for her, and a broad smile spread across my face.

Ferdinand, in contrast, was overcome with grief as he watched us. That he had even found a way to spare Myne's family was a cause for celebration—few commoners survived opposing a noble—but it meant severing Myne's connection to her family much earlier than he had anticipated. She could no longer wait until she turned ten and needed to enroll at the Royal Academy. It was a cause of great concern for Ferdinand, who had come to cherish their relationship after hearing so many enviable, heartwarming reports from Damuel and Fran.

Myne's parents understood the situation and promptly knelt, their expressions racked with anguish. Tuuli was told to kneel as well. She looked around, then quickly did as instructed. Ferdinand could see Myne's face fall as she realized she wasn't kneeling with them.

The room was cleared, and silence fell. Sylvester was openly reluctant but wore his best archducal expression as he permitted those kneeling to sit down. Going forward, they would discuss Myne becoming a noble and getting adopted.

"Is this my fault?!" Tuuli cried. "You were attacked because I came to get you, right?!"

Myne shook her head. "The culprit was inside the temple all along, so I would have been attacked even if you hadn't come to get me. If this is anyone's fault, it's mine for getting you all wrapped up in this." She paused, then gazed straight into her sister's eyes and said, "It was scary, wasn't it?"

Myne did what she could to explain the situation, trying her best to console Tuuli. She stressed that she had to become a noble to spare her family and attendants.

But you are not to blame, Myne. We ended up in this situation because I could not keep my attendants under control.

I could hear what Ferdinand was thinking. He was watching with gritted teeth as Myne tried to comfort Tuuli, who had cast her eyes down and started to sob. If only Arno had properly informed him of Fran's message or Bezewanst's arrival, he could have prevented the incident before it spiraled out of control.

This was not what I planned.

Ferdinand wrestled with shame and regret while Myne attempted to reassure each member of her family. He was moved by the strength of their bonds and distraught that he had to be the one to tear them apart.

"I promise. I'll make your clothes, no matter what."

"I love you, Tuuli. I'm so proud to have an older sister like you."

"Don't push yourself too hard," her mom said. "I love you, Myne. My precious Myne."

"I love you too, Mom."

Myne then took Kamil in her arms. “I don’t think you’ll remember me, but I’ll make lots of picture books for you. Be sure to read them all for me, okay?”

Her last heart-to-heart was with her dad.

“I’m your father, but I wasn’t strong enough...” he said in a low voice. “I couldn’t protect you.”

“No, Dad, you’ve protected me my whole life. If I ever get married, I hope it’ll be to someone strong who can keep me safe just like you have.”

“If whoever you marry can’t protect you, I’ll come beat him up myself.”

“Uh-huh. I know you’ll always be there for me, Dad.”

“I take and take and never give...” I muttered, unable to bear what I was seeing. Even when my family showered me with love, I showed them so little appreciation in return. I would probably have started crying if not for the fact that I was stuck in a memory and physically unable to.

I wanted to regain my lost memories. I needed to. I couldn’t stand the thought of not remembering these people who were clearly so important to me.

“My name’s going to change, and I can’t call you ‘Dad’ anymore, but... I’ll always be your daughter. I’ll protect this city, and you, and everyone. I will.”

Myne’s ring shone. Her emotions stirred, and her mana started to run rampant. Ferdinand clutched his schtappe and rose to his feet, determined to keep her from accidentally harming her family. He warned her to be careful... but she refused.

“My mana is overflowing because of my love for my family. I need to use it for their sake.”

Myne’s ring shone brighter, and she slowly held out her hands.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies. O God of Darkness and Goddess of Light. O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm. O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. Hear my prayers and grant us your blessings.”

Each name Myne spoke caused a yellow glow to radiate from her ring. The light of a blessing began to dance through the air, made purely through prayer and without the aid of a magic circle or divine sigils.

This is too great of a burden for her body to bear!

Ferdinand debated whether he should intervene. Meanwhile, Myne continued to petition the gods, letting her mana stream out freely.

“I offer you my heart, my prayers, my gratitude, and ask for your holy protection. Grant those I love the power to strive toward their goals, the power to deflect malice, the power to heal their pain, and the power to endure trials and tribulations.”

The light swirling around the room—a manifestation of Myne’s love for her family—was so stunning that it rendered Ferdinand speechless. I, too, was enraptured.

“Eek!”

“Rozemyne? Are you okay?”

The moment the blessing rained down, my memories returned to me, starting from when I’d first awoken with a fever. The days I’d spent with my loved ones, the time Lutz had asked me whether I really was Myne, the joy of completing our first batch of paper, and the excitement of creating a printing press—only now did it occur to me just how much Mestionora had severed.

As my memories continued to return, I came to realize the truth of my situation: I’d ended up forgetting not just the people I cared about most but also all the times my negative emotions had taken control. I remembered the starving orphans locked away in the orphanage’s basement, being held at knifepoint by Shikza, almost dying to a trombe, and my Pandabus getting bound with light before I was made to drink a strange potion. My thoughts then wandered to Eglantine and Anastasius forcing me to circle the Academy’s shrines, the door that had refused to open and stopped me from obtaining the Grutrissheit, seeing Ferdinand collapse when he was poisoned, the man who had turned into a feystone upon dying...

“Rozemyne! Rozemyne...!”

Ferdinand’s voice echoed in my ears. He already sounded angry and would get even angrier the longer I remained silent... yet I couldn’t bear to respond right away.

Give me a moment. I need my head to stop spinning...

I nervously opened my eyes to look at Ferdinand and saw that his face was mere inches from mine. His eyebrows were drawn in a deep frown, but he relaxed the moment he saw I was okay. He held me close and muttered, “Thank goodness...” under his breath.

Wait, what? Is this really him? It can’t be, right? He must have broken or something.

I remained completely still, clueless as to what was happening.

A Future Chosen

Yeah, I'm getting hugged right now...

I wasn't entirely sure what had inspired this sudden change in him, but it was rare for Ferdinand to hug me unprovoked. It was strange, but I simply rode the wave and wrapped my arms around him. My head was still spinning from the sudden rush of memories, and reliving such tender moments with my family had made me miss them more than ever.

Ferdinand recoiled and pulled away without the slightest hesitation. "Rozemyne, what do you think you are doing?" he asked with a grimace.

I was aghast. *He* had embraced *me*! Actually saying that would spark a debate, though, and my odds of winning were laughable while my thoughts were still clouded. I would need to take a more diplomatic approach.

"Isn't it unfair that you get to hug me when you're stressed out, but I can't do the same with you? I wish to request an extension of our embrace."

"Excuse me...?"

"Thanks to the double whammy of us synchronizing and my memories suddenly coming back to me, my mind and emotions are a complete mess," I said, making my demands clear.

Ferdinand grimaced again and, with some trepidation, relented. I was finally able to look around, whereupon I noticed we were back in the foundation's hall. Ferdinand was on his knees with his arms once again wrapped around me. No wonder I didn't feel cold.

"Heave ho..." I muttered, twisting in place so that I could embrace him more comfortably. His scent and warmth put me at ease, but his heart was pounding, and his breathing seemed unusually shallow.

"This sure is calming..." I said.

"Not for me," Ferdinand replied with a sigh. I sensed that he was about to pull away again, so I stubbornly clung to him.

“That means you need even more hugs. I’m gonna go all out.”

“That is *not* what it means...” Ferdinand shot back. He sounded tired and somewhat annoyed but held me closer with one hand and used the other to play with my hair. In an unsurprising twist, he really did want more hugs; he was just refusing to be honest about it.

“Then why were you already embracing me when I woke up?”

“That was... your fault,” Ferdinand replied, truly displeased. “You refused to wake up when our synchronization abruptly ended.” He had apparently started to panic, fearing that I had climbed the towering stairway to the distant heights.

“Was I really in that much danger?”

“Do you even need to ask? You spent *days* on the verge of death. It amazes me that you can remain so calm.”

If we had allowed my mana level to return to the point before I supplied the foundation, I would most likely have succumbed to the pain. Using a rejuvenation potion had been out of the question, meaning it was a race to see whether my mana or my stamina would run out first. And of course, if not for Ferdinand dyeing my mana as soon as it reached its minimum threshold, my lack of mana would probably have killed me. It wouldn’t have been strange for me to have died at any moment over the past few days.

“I understood that my life was on the line,” I said. “That was why I didn’t want to sleep and give my mana time to replenish. Still, I never doubted that you’d come through for me. It was the only thing that kept me from getting too negative.” I really had thought everything would work out in the end—assuming we managed to drain my mana—but remaining so optimistic hadn’t been an option for Ferdinand, on whom my survival depended.

“The moment your mana was drained, I made you drink a synchronization potion and poured my liquid mana down your throat,” Ferdinand explained. “I used the memory-searching magic tool to channel even more mana into you, then called out to you from within your mind. You took a painfully long time to respond, and even then, none of your lost memories wanted to return. We did eventually stumble upon a memory with potential—and as soon as the light of your blessing came down, our synchronization ended."

He had regained consciousness, unsure of what had just happened. It seemed reasonable to assume that I'd canceled our synchronization, but then why hadn't I woken up with him? Seeing me completely unresponsive, he had despaired that the omni-elemental blessing in my memories must have reacted with the trace amount of divine mana still within my body.

It hadn't been my intention to end our synchronization; I'd seen the blessing and then completely zoned out as my lost memories came rushing back to me. Then I'd woken up to find Ferdinand embracing me for seemingly no reason.

"You don't need to worry anymore," I said, patting him on the back. "Because of you, my memories have returned."

Despite my best attempts to comfort him, Ferdinand still seemed distraught. His heart continued to race, and the fingers combing through my hair froze. He squeezed me so tight that it went from feeling nice to almost hurting. I gazed up at him, worried that something was wrong.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Rozemyne, do you...?"

"Do I what?" His voice kept cracking and sounded so raspy that I could barely understand him.

Ferdinand paused, his eyes betraying a deep sense of dread, and then loosened his hold on me enough to pull away a little. "Do you wish to be a commoner again?"

"Excuse me...?" I cocked my head at him, completely unsure what he was getting at.

"We could use this opportunity to claim that you passed away while expending the last of your divine mana and return you to being a commoner."

My heart thumped. Now that memories of my commoner days were fresh on my mind, the idea of going back to my lower-city family sounded more appealing than I could put into words. I wanted to agree at once, but I needed to be realistic; it was impossible for me to return to my old way of life when everyone knew me as a divine avatar. Ferdinand understood noble politics far better than I did, so his proposal seemed nonsensical. Unless...

“Um, Ferdinand... Is this your way of telling me I’m going to die soon? Like, I don’t have long before my divine mana kills me, so I might as well spend the rest of my time with my family?”

“No. Synchronizing with you made it perfectly clear that you are at your happiest when you are with your family. Having to live apart from them would only cause you heartache.”

Is he being serious right now?

My pulse quickened, and my breathing felt shallow. “How would you even go about making me a commoner again? Everyone in the lower city thinks Myne is dead, and nobles of every duchy now recognize me as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. Aren’t you forgetting Alexandria’s foundation and my library city and...?”

“We would wait until the Archduke Conference, when the Zent would make you Aub Alexandria and declare your engagement to me. From there, we would make internal plans for me to take over as the archduke and then announce your death as the result of some lingering health concerns. You would return to being a commoner, and I would oversee the foundation and the construction of your library city.”

Ferdinand assured me that I could go back to being a commoner as long as we coordinated with the Gutenbergs’ move. The commoners of Alexandria didn’t know that Myne had died at seven years old. It wouldn’t be too hard for the Gutenbergs who knew my face to keep quiet about it, and some extra assistance from the Plantin Company and everyone else would surely help with our cover-up.

He continued, “Though it was out of the question in Ehrenfest, if I took over as Aub Alexandria, I could protect you and your family. It occurred to me only during the synchronization, and many details will need to be ironed out, but it is worth considering.”

Ferdinand sounded hesitant; his idea must have been even harder to implement than he was letting on. Still, he would never have proposed something that was outright impossible.

One by one, the faces of my family arose in my mind. Dad, after realizing we could meet only through work, had traveled all the way to Hasse just to see my face and exchange a few words with me. Mom had gone above and beyond to become a Renaissance, and Tuuli had spent years making accessories for me as my very own hairpin craftswoman. Then there was Kamil, whom I'd only managed to glimpse during the baptism ceremony.

Is living with them in the lower city even an option?

One part of me kept repeating that it was okay to follow that path, but the other stubbornly disagreed. I could never be so heartless as to make Ferdinand endure the burdens to come. It felt like my noble and commoner sides were in a battle to the death.

Am I going to be another in a long line of people who have dumped their troubles on Ferdinand to live as they desire?

For my life to return to normal, Ferdinand would need to face a grueling battle as the aub to protect my family and me. Forced to shoulder a crushing burden while showing no weakness to anyone, he would end up facing unthinkable hardships.

My heart aches...

I clutched my chest. Something was eating away at me, but I didn't know what.

"You're right," I said. "Even now, I want to spend time with my family. But I care just as much about your happiness."

It was *my* decision to steal Ahrensbach's foundation. How awful would it be for me to abandon my role as Alexandria's new aub to indulge in a carefree life with my family? Leaving everything to Ferdinand at this juncture seemed even crueler than Sylvester dumping his workload on him or Detlinde abandoning her duties to do as she pleased.

"You don't need to feel indebted to me," I said, looking him dead in the eye. "You have repaid me a hundred times over. I refuse to abandon you just so I can be a commoner again.”

Ferdinand adopted a neutral expression and shook his head. “If your memories have returned, the same might be true of your feystone phobia. Someone who cannot use feystones will not be able to survive as a noble, let alone an aub. Even if you stayed, as our mana is almost identical, I would need to perform any necessary brews in your stead. You would serve as a figurehead aub and nothing more, so your presence—or lack thereof—would not impact my burden.”

Ferdinand was only somewhat correct. The sole reason Ahrensbach was being remade into Alexandria and not wiped out for its treason was the advertisement that a divine avatar would take over as aub and cleanse it of sin. How would the nobles of other duchies react if anyone else ended up in power? Not even Ferdinand could predict that.

“No matter how useless I might be, my status as a divine avatar is crucial, is it not? Just how much torment would you need to bear to make me a commoner again? Do you think I’m too stupid to realize what it would mean for you or just irresponsible enough not to care?”

“I consider you neither stupid nor irresponsible,” Ferdinand replied at length. “I simply believe you should return to your family. Lutz means more to you than anyone else, correct? Our synchronization made that clear to me. This is your only chance to be with him.”

Lutz and my family were important to me, but I wasn’t going to give up on Ferdinand to be with them. Were he some irredeemable tyrant driven by lust and ambition to take extra wives and a harem of smoking concubines, then sure. He was the complete opposite, though.

“I could never just leave you!” I exclaimed. “Do you have any idea how much I’d worry?! You’re awful at asking for help! You try to do everything on your own and rely on potions to get by! You’d drop dead in no time!”

“Rozemyne—unless you take this opportunity to return, the seed of your romance with Lutz will never blossom.” Ferdinand grimaced. “You will need to marry me instead.”

My momentum died almost immediately. How had our conversation gone from returning me to my family to a marriage with Lutz, of all people?

Um... Are we not on the same page?

“Ferdinand... At what point did this become a discussion about marriage? I wouldn’t marry Lutz even if I did go back to being a commoner. Nobles might consider me a catch because of my mana and status, but the people of the lower city wouldn’t give me a second glance. In their eyes, I’m sickly and unable to give them children, since they don’t have mana.”

As much as I wanted to return to my loved ones, the thought of marrying Lutz had never even crossed my mind. He deserved someone so much better, especially when he’d gone to such great trouble to keep me in touch with my family.

Now that I thought about it, I wouldn’t be a great wife even by noble standards; my socializing and embroidering skills were painfully lacking. Only a weirdo would want to get close to me outside the context of an arranged marriage.

“And what’s this about us *needing* to marry each other?” I asked. “Isn’t it my choice?” Aubs chose their own partners, and the Zent then approved the union. Ferdinand wasn’t being forced into anything.

“Yes, it certainly is...” He cast his eyes down, slowly exhaled, and then held up three fingers. “You have three options. One is to return to being a commoner and marry whomever you please. Another is to continue with our plan and marry me. Or you could order Lady Eglantine to cancel the royal decree tied to our engagement and marry another man fit to wed Aub Alexandria. Take your pick.”

Huh...?

My eyes widened. “Excuse my bluntness, but what are you talking about? You make it sound like we’re already engaged. When in the world did that happen?”

“The moment you stole Ahrensbach’s foundation.”

“Bwuh?”

As I stared in shock, my mouth agape, Ferdinand explained. “By way of royal decree, Trauerqual ordered me to marry the inexperienced Aub Ahrensbach and support her in her administration. I must then adopt Lady Letizia during my Starbinding and educate her to take over as the aub. The decree came about because Ahrensbach needed someone to support its next generation or else it would collapse. Detlinde was due to become the aub at the time, but that mantle has since passed to you, and the decree remains in place."

He spoke like it was obvious. How was I supposed to know the royal decree would remain in place even once Detlinde was out of the picture or that taking Ahrensbach's foundation would mean accepting a fiancé as well?

"But nobody said a word about that before now..."

"No one had reason to mention it during the heat of the fighting. And when the situation calmed down, the divine power had already left you in a state where it was important not to make you emotional."

I clapped my hands together in realization. "Aah... *That's* why my retainers changed their tune." Despite their initial complaints about me getting too close to Ferdinand, they'd suddenly stopped commenting on it. Only now had the mystery been solved.

Ferdinand sighed. "Your retainers became so compliant because you mentioned in Ehrenfest that I would make an ideal partner in a political marriage. The fault lies with your irresponsible language."

"Whaaat?!" That was news to me. "Well, I'm glad we worked this out before it caused a disaster. You're a responsible man, Ferdinand, but there's no need to accept this burden just for my sake. We can go ahead and nullify the—"

"Make no mistake, Rozemyne—I actively sought this outcome."

I peered at him, unsure what he meant. He must have read my expression because he immediately elaborated.

"For as long as we have known each other, I have observed the bonds between you and your family—the ways you strove to remain close to them as a noble and their determination not to lose you. Then you declared that I meant just as much to you and continued to look out for me even after I moved to Ahrensbach. Everything I understand about family came from you. The synchronization potion made it clear, no? Just how much I crave the kind of bond you have with your family."

I nodded. His memories had revealed envy and admiration for my family... then bitterness and regret over tearing us apart.

"I might not have felt this way if I had remained in Ehrenfest," Ferdinand said. "It would have been enough to watch you and your family from the shadows. But when I moved, the voices around you threatened to sever our connection. I did not wish to lose what we had. Thus... exploiting this royal decree was the most practical and efficient way to obtain you."

He brushed my cheek with his finger, and an inexplicable shiver ran down my spine.

"The king who gave the royal decree is a king no longer, meaning he cannot interfere with my plans," Ferdinand continued. "I also threatened the new Zent not to intervene unless you order it."

"You threatened the Zent...? Ferdinand—"

Before I could say anything else, his finger moved to my lips. He pressed against them only gently, but it was enough to silence me. I was hesitant even to breathe.

"I went to great lengths to make sure no one would oppose our engagement after your ascension to mortal divinity. I could not bear the thought of another man taking my place as your true family."

I swallowed hard. There was a fire in Ferdinand's light-golden eyes that almost scared me. I wasn't sure I could give him whatever he was lusting for, and it made me so anxious that I wanted to run away.

But the hand resting on my back kept me in place.

"You are the only one who can stop me now, Rozemyne. The new Zent's life is in your hands. Will you return to your loved ones and give me glimpses of your happiness? Will you accept our engagement and welcome me into your family? Or will you order Eglantine to overturn the royal decree? The choice is yours."

Ferdinand stared straight at me as he awaited my answer. His intensity took me by surprise. I didn’t know what he wanted, but I doubted that marrying me was the answer. Romantic love wasn’t something I understood, and it was beyond me to return feelings that I couldn’t even comprehend. My inability to give him what he desired would only frustrate me until the guilt became too much to bear.

“Your choice, Rozemyne?” he prompted.

I twisted on instinct, hoping to escape, but I couldn’t break his hold on me. I gazed up at him as he continued to await my answer.

We sat in silence for a while until, at last, Ferdinand cast his eyes down and sighed. He stopped touching my face and removed the hand resting on my back. The next time I met his gaze, I saw that he was defeated. Even his body language spoke to his disappointment. Now more than ever, I could tell that he was used to having his wishes ignored.

This isn’t right...

On instinct, I shook my head. I didn’t understand the kind of love being discussed, but I couldn’t allow Ferdinand to leave. He rarely ever said what he wanted this openly. I didn’t want to discourage him from ever doing it again, so I reached out and gave him a hug.

“Rozemyne, what are...?”

“I realize this shouldn’t be the case by now, but guess what? I still don’t understand romantic love!”

“A somewhat strange declaration to make while clinging to someone, but yes, I am well aware,” Ferdinand replied, exasperation clear in his voice. “My only desire is to become your family in the truest sense; I do not expect any of the more sensitive aspects of romance that commonly occur between men and women. As I was already like family to you, if we do get married, things need only stay as they are.”

That put my mind at ease. If he really was okay with me treating him like family and not doing anything romantic, then I wouldn’t disappoint him.

“I cannot stand the thought of our connection being severed and another man becoming a member of your true family. That is all.” Ferdinand touched the rainbow ornament in my hair. “Do you not find it miserable how much people gossip and assume simply because you express your concern for someone?”

I did. It frustrated me to no end that, even when his life was on the line, everyone had urged me not to worry about him.

But if we’re engaged... I can worry about him without anyone complaining.

“Are you really okay with our relationship staying the same?” I asked.

“Yes.”

His quick, casual response made me hesitant. I didn’t want him to change his mind once we were married and suddenly start expecting more from me.

“And you said my feystone phobia will probably return. In the event that it does, I’ll do my best to help wherever I can, but it won’t stop me from being a burden as both an aub and a wife. Are you truly willing to accept that?”

“I am. You might not be able to use feystones, but your status as a divine avatar will compensate. If you return to being a commoner, I will not even have that to depend upon. Think carefully about this decision, as this is your last chance to return to your old way of living.”

“I want to go back to my family... but it wouldn’t be easy for me.”

Too much was resting on my shoulders. In my absence, I doubted Ferdinand would show Letizia even the slightest trace of consideration, and the nobles of

Ahrensbach would receive harsher punishments. I also had the names of several of my retainers; how would my "death" impact them? Returning their names was an option, but Roderick and Gretia would need to go back to the families they had cut ties with. And what about Matthias and Laurenz, who had given their names to avoid execution? I couldn't imagine Hartmut and Clarissa would even accept having their names returned, and would the whole ordeal not make Ferdinand seem especially suspicious?

Somehow, I get the feeling my name-sworn would all go with Rozemyne to her grave.

Ferdinand wasn't one to shy away from eliminating those in his path; he would do whatever was necessary to perfectly forge my death. I sincerely doubted that someone with the gall to attack Erwaermen and the Goddess of Wisdom would refrain from taking out a few fellow nobles.

"It wouldn't be easy?" he repeated. "Care to explain?"

In an attempt to appeal to his more rational side, I elected not to say that I refused to abandon everyone I cared about from my life as a noble and instead chose some more agreeable phrasing. Both explanations were honest, but this one was more likely to convince him.

"For me to become a commoner, my schtappe would need to be sealed, no? I wouldn't be able to make my own rejuvenation potions or rely on you or my retainers for them. As for draining my mana, I would continuously need to visit the temple. It might sound grim, but I doubt I would survive very long as a commoner."

Indeed, I wouldn't be able to last as a simple commoner—that was why I'd joined the temple and endured so many encounters with nobles all those years ago. Not to mention, I now had enough mana to become the Zent; I would never be able to keep it under control. I would run into nobles on a regular basis during my trips to the temple—they would all soon come to realize the true importance of religion—and it would only take one of them recognizing me for all sorts of complications to arise.

"Not to mention," I continued, "I think the life of a commoner would prove too much for me. I couldn't even draw water back when I was living in the lower city. I can’t do chores, and so much time has passed that I wouldn’t know how to blend in.”

Since my arrival in this world, I’d spent only two years as a commoner. Even then, my health had rendered me mostly bedridden, so I’d seldom had the chance to associate with my neighbors or attend weddings, funerals, and the like. I didn’t have a good foundation to build upon.

“I *could* move in with my family again, but I’d only be a burden on them,” I said. “As long as you arrange for me to meet them on a regular basis, I think it might be best for me to remain a noble.”

Ferdinand wrapped an arm around me and once again held me tight. “Would you... truly choose me, Rozemyne?”

“As long as you don’t regret marrying me.”

I’d entrusted my body to Ferdinand and was taking comfort in his warmth when I suddenly realized something: now that we were alone and my divine mana was gone, there was something we needed to do.

“Ferdinand, let me give you back your name stone. I don’t need it now that my divine mana is gone, right?”

He had given me his name for practical reasons—because my overwhelming divine power had made it tough for him to even be near me. Resolved to return it, I took out his name stone... but Ferdinand made no move to accept it. He simply looked to one side.

“You do not need it...?” he repeated, noticeably upset.

I started to panic. In hindsight, I really had chosen my words poorly. “I just mean, um... it isn’t right for me to keep it.”

“I do not follow.”

“Doesn’t it feel wrong for us to have, like, a master-servant relationship? Family needs to be equal.” And if we were going to get married, there was even less of a reason for me to keep his name stone.

Ferdinand said nothing in response. He kept looking between me and the small cocoon in my hand, which he didn’t even attempt to take.

“Is there a problem?” I eventually asked.

“We can be equals without you returning my name... no?”

I cocked my head. His meaning was lost on me at first, but then I remembered something Leonore had told me. Back when we were discussing whether to take the children of the former Veronica faction’s names, she had said that she was especially taken with the idea of exchanging names with the person she loved and swearing that their feelings for one another would endure for eternity.

“Are you proposing we give our names to each other?” I asked. “That sounds like a moving scene from a story—and it *would* make us equals—but it isn’t exactly realistic. Leonore said so too.”

“It is unrealistic, hm?”

“Correct. I mean, what about our descendants?”

“To whom do you refer?” Ferdinand asked, furrowing his brow.

“I... I mean... Let’s say we *do* get married. I-It’s reasonable to assume we might, um... have children, right?”

Uh-oh. This was bad. Thinking about getting married and procreating was awkward enough on its own. Discussing it with Ferdinand was ten times worse. Something I’d thought would never have anything to do with me now seemed very close at hand.

Ngh... Stay calm, Rozemyne. Stay calm!

“As the aub, I’m going to need a successor, meaning we’d need to adopt at the very least. We also need someone who can keep the city alive in our absence. Someone like Letizia, right? If we’re engaged through that royal decree, then we’re going to have to adopt her.”

“First, we will need to abolish that tradition of Ahrensbach’s so she can remain an archduke candidate, but yes—once you have come of age and our Starbinding has been held, we will need to adopt her. Letizia arguably shared the same fate as the noble children orphaned in the war with Lanzenave, so I intended for her to stay in the temple until the adoption.”

A relieved sigh escaped me. I’d thought it best for Ferdinand, Letizia’s main victim, to decide how we should treat her going forward. It was good to hear that he’d chosen to mask her crimes; it wouldn’t have been pleasant punishing a child we knew had been exploited.

“So,” Ferdinand continued, “what do our descendants have to do with our name-swearing?”

“I... I mean... Again, we’re going to be married. If we give our names to each other and one of us ascends to the distant heights, the other will immediately follow. Think about the hardships that would create for any kids we leave behind. They would struggle enough with only one parent.”

During my time as Urano, my father had died in a car accident. If my mother had somehow been name-sworn to him and died at the same time, I wouldn’t have known what to do. Even in this world, it wasn’t uncommon for people to lose their parents while they were still young. Benno, Sylvester, and Giebe Illgner all came to mind.

“A lot of Sylvester’s troubles came from him having to take over as the archduke at such a young age, right? He was already an adult by then, but imagine if the burden had dropped into his lap when he was still only a child. Not to mention, he had Bonifatius to oversee the handover. We won’t have a single adult archduke candidate to provide support in the event of our untimely deaths—not including Letizia, the two of us comprise Alexandria’s entire archducal family. Should we not do our best to avoid such an unfortunate outcome?”

Ferdinand stared at me in surprise, like he hadn’t considered that outcome. “I see. An astute observation. I must admit, I am somewhat shocked to hear such a forward-thinking argument from you. Your mind is normally far too preoccupied with books.”

Following that rather mean remark, Ferdinand gestured for me to stand. Even now, he hadn’t taken back his name stone. I stayed put at first but reluctantly complied when he repeated the instruction out loud.

“Ferdinand. Your name stone,” I said, fixing him with a glare as I proffered it again.

He responded with a dismissive wave, then looked down at all the tools scattered about and muttered that he would need to come back tomorrow to clean.

“Ferdinand,” I repeated.

“Come here. How is your health? Has your mana calmed down?” He touched my forehead and nape as he launched into one of his usual inspections. I could guess from the way he was planning which potion to give me before bed that he had absolutely no intention of taking back his name stone.

“Ferdinand!” I cried.

“I will take it back two years from now. Please be patient until then. There is no need for you to set aside Schutzaria’s shield.” He then picked me up with one arm and carried me to the exit as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Schutzaria’s shield...? Can you make that with a name stone?”

I had so many questions, but Ferdinand refused to answer them. He uttered not another word as he took me out of the foundation’s hall.

“Lady Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand,” Gretia and Justus said, rushing over as soon as they saw us. “We were worried when you did not return.”

“It took Rozemyne quite some time to regain consciousness,” Ferdinand replied. “But you need not worry any longer.”

My other retainers arrived in short order, having most likely been informed of our return. Hartmut and Clarissa fought to reach me first and then waxed ecstatic about how wondrous they had found my recreation of the ancient spell. An enormous magic circle had apparently spread across the night sky and put on such a grand display that no one would question it had come from a divine avatar.

“Have the knights returned from the border gates?” Ferdinand asked.

“Strahl and his group should return soon,” Justus answered.

“I see. Angelica, I entrust Rozemyne to you.” He handed me over and then turned to my attendants. “Gretia, Lieseleta—have Rozemyne drink the blenrusinfused rejuvenation potions in this box and prioritize her rest above all else. Cleanse her with a waschen instead of giving her a bath, then adjust your plans for tomorrow depending on her health."

Ferdinand seemed exhausted as he instructed my other retainers. On instinct, I reached out to him and said, "You could use Schlaftraum's—"

"Rozemyne. Please. For once, can you *not* pray to the gods?"

In retrospect, that was probably wise. "I shall save it for tomorrow, then."

Angelica picked me up and carried me to my bed. A canopied frame had already been prepared so that I could go straight to sleep.

Lieseleta wore a bright smile as she approached and started changing my clothes. "Indeed, the awe-inspiring divine power that overtook your mana has faded. I can approach without you needing to be covered with silver cloth."

"You looked quite divine as you shone with light, Lady Rozemyne, but it puts me more at ease to see you back to normal," Gretia agreed. Only then did it fully sink in that my divine power was gone for good.

Busy Days

I awoke the next morning feeling better than ever. Not having to worry about dying meant I slept well, I got to drink a potion for the first time in ages, and most of all, recovering my mana no longer caused me unbearable pain. Life couldn’t get any better than this.

Lieseleta’s hands didn’t tremble as she did my hair. To put it simply... it felt like I was human again.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said, “Lord Ferdinand wishes to check your health after breakfast.”

“I see. I wonder if he’ll bless me with some reading time.” Surely I deserved some now that I’d come back from the brink of death. I looked to Gretia, who looked to Clarissa for more information.

“I could not say...” Gretia replied. “It will depend on your health, I imagine, but your schedule is already rather packed today.”

Clarissa nodded and opened up her diptych. “You can expect to be immensely busy in the lead-up to the Archduke Conference. An entwickeln must be performed posthaste to rebuild the city and castle. We must also welcome the new Zent so that the criminals can be punished, not to mention the preparations that need to be made for your engagement ceremony. I doubt you will get much time to read in the near future. The Noble’s Quarter is in an uproar preparing for the entwickeln, and the scholars are hard at work producing the necessary schematics.”

“Hmm? Wait, hold on. My engagement ceremony?” I’d agreed to marry Ferdinand only the night before. Weren’t things moving a little too fast?

Clarissa’s blue eyes widened in response to my surprise. “If we do not perform the entwickeln at once, then your Gutenbergs and the war orphans will not have anywhere to live. It would also be considered a slight against the new Zent to welcome her to a city still bearing Lanzenave’s scars.”

The importance of performing an entwickeln wasn’t lost on me—if people were going to be homeless, then we needed to act fast. Even when I was formally recognized as an aub, I wouldn’t be able to summon Fran, the Gutenbergs, and everyone else to Alexandria unless we attached doors and windows to the newly made buildings. Carpenters would need to be hired at once.

“I can understand needing to rush the entwickeln, but why is Zent Eglantine coming now when she just came into power and the Archduke Conference is right around the corner? Is this really the best time to invite her? Can the criminals not wait?”

As I understood it, Eglantine had gone through hell to make her name stone and carry out all the required preparations in time for the transference ceremony. Coming to Alexandria would only exhaust her further.

“I am told that one of her reasons for coming here is to ensure that the Lanzenave Estate and its teleportation circle to her future home have been completely destroyed,” Clarissa explained. “Though her most important goal is to approve your engagement with Lord Ferdinand.”

“Won’t she give her approval during the Archduke Conference? Is there a point in doing it now when we’re already so busy?” I pursed my lips, wishing for more time to prepare emotionally.

My retainers all stared at me in shock. One by one, Lieseleta, Clarissa, and Gretia extolled the importance of performing the engagement ceremony sooner rather than later.

“Lord Ferdinand is still associated with Ehrenfest. Unless the ceremony is performed soon, he will not be able to join you at the Archduke Conference.”

“If we postpone your engagement, will you not feel the consequences more than anyone? Attending the Archduke Conference alone at your age sounds like far too great of a burden.”

“The rest of the archducal family has been obliterated, and you have spent not even a full month in Alexandria. As you were unfamiliar with Ahrensbach’s previous circumstances and have yet to meet all of its nobles, I do believe you will need Lord Ferdinand to support you.”

I inhaled sharply. They all made excellent points. Now wasn't the time to be embarrassed about exchanging feystones in front of a massive crowd of nobles or about giving dramatic declarations of love filled with biblical allusions; delaying my engagement would cause me no end of trouble.

"There is much you will need to do as the aub," Ferdinand said, having taken me to my new office once he'd completed my health inspection. "This will go a lot quicker if you understand your schedule and the importance of each role you must perform."

"I thought we'd see at least one scholar..." I mused while inspecting the room. We were the only ones here; there weren't people working or waiting outside. "Isn't everyone preparing for the Archduke Conference?"

"They are working in my office. This room has not been used for anything except storing documents for quite some time."

Detlinde had apparently come here to work, but not for long. She had soon grown tired of the walk and insisted that anything she needed to sign be brought to her personal chambers instead. Of course, she'd still refused to allow Ferdinand entry to her room, so most of the commonly used documents had needed to be moved to his office.

"That said, this first task of yours requires us to be here. You must contact Sylvester using the water mirror. Then we will open the dormitory in the Royal Academy." He got me to stand in front of the tool used for emergency communication between aubs and said, "How fares your feystone phobia?"

I gazed down at the water mirror. Seeing the feystone within made the blood drain from my face. I touched it with trembling hands and tried to smile while I supplied it with mana.

"N-No complaints," I said. "As you can s-see, I am touching the mirror without issue. Maybe because my negative memories hit me all at once, their strength in isolation seems much w-weaker than before."

"You might have convinced me if not for your shaking hands and the tears in your eyes." Ferdinand placed some cloth over the feystone so I wouldn't have to see it. "Still, that you are even conscious indicates some improvement. Do not overdo it.”

“Rozemyne?” came a voice from the water mirror. “If you’re contacting me like this, then you must have gotten rid of your divine power. How are you doing? Feeling better?”

As soon as he appeared in the mirror, Sylvester asked about my health. I could tell that I’d worried him to no end. I grinned and waved to assuage his concern.

“Yeah, thanks to Ferdinand, the divine power’s all gone. I’m doing much better now.”

“Glad to hear it,” Sylvester said with a relieved sigh. He mentioned that he would pass the good news along to Elvira, Bonifatius, and the others. “Ferdinand—as decided, I’ve permitted anyone with an Ehrenfest brooch to enter the dormitory. As soon as the dorm sends word, I’ll give the schematics to Rozemyne’s retainers.”

Wait, what? Decided as of when?

I was at a complete loss, but Ferdinand gave a nod indicating that he’d expected as much. “Your assistance is appreciated. Do you anticipate any problems in the run-up to the Archduke Conference?”

“Not as long as things go well on your end. I know better than anyone how busy someone gets once they’ve formally taken the archducal seat, and nobles are all too prone to looking down on young aubs. I’ll provide all the support I can.”

I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, but I thanked him anyway.

Sylvester continued, “Send word when you’ve decided on a date for your engagement ceremony. I’ll make sure everything aligns.”

“It will take place the day after the Zent’s visit,” Ferdinand replied. “We will contact you by water mirror when the finer details have been ironed out.”

“Oh, spare me all that. You know I’m going to get called over no matter what I’m doing. And you also know who’s to blame for me being so busy right now. I only answered this time because I wanted to make sure Rozemyne was doing okay. For anything else, stick to letters sent through the dormitory. You aren't the only one with a full plate."

And with that, Ferdinand and Sylvester's brief exchange came to an end. The latter's face vanished from the mirror.

"Ferdinand, could you not have explained all that to me *before* we contacted Sylvester?" I asked with a stern glare. "Don't you always preach the importance of sharing intelligence ahead of time?"

"I shall enlighten you en route to our next destination," Ferdinand said, then signaled my retainers and took me outside the room. "Your stamina has yet to fully recover. Angelica, carry her."

Angelica picked me up, and we departed. I wasn't familiar enough with the castle to guess where we were headed.

"Following a discussion about your plans for Alexandria, I obtained Sylvester's support by using a teleportation circle at the border gate to make sure your Gutenbergs approved the schematics for the entwickeln."

"Excuse me? They've been checked...?" I knew he'd returned to the castle and taken care of some administrative work while I was under the throes of my divine power, but I hadn't expected him to send schematics to Ehrenfest.

"Yes, as you considered it urgent. Now that your divine power has faded, I wish to use the dormitory to receive the schematics and move your luggage. To that end, I obtained permission for your retainers still registered with Ehrenfest to enter."

Using the border gate would have meant sending the items from Alexandria's castle and trusting the knights stationed on our side of the gate to hand them over to Ehrenfest. Ferdinand was still wary of most of the knights from Old Ahrensbach, so he wanted to avoid relying on them when he could. That made sense to me.

Ferdinand continued, "Once the engagement ceremony is over, you will return to Ehrenfest until you have formally been made Aub Alexandria. This will stop the nobles of Old Ahrensbach from being able to approach you and make your security much easier to manage. It will also give you a chance to finish preparing for the move before official duties take over your schedule.”

“There’s a lot I need to memorize before the Archduke Conference, right? And is it really okay for me to return to Ehrenfest when I’m due to become the aub of another duchy?”

“Study Ahrensbach’s geography and various industries, but do not worry about its nobles and their factions for the time being. I intend to use a series of tests to determine which nobles we will favor moving forward, and you will start by memorizing the names of those who pass. Not even I am well acquainted with many of the nobles Detlinde snubbed over the years.”

Those who had continued to work in the castle despite Detlinde’s cold treatment of them stood out, but Ferdinand still needed to find out more about the nobles from the provinces. He hadn’t interacted with them much—or with those Detlinde had commanded to stay out of her sight.

Having been thrust into a test of my own just recently—with the country’s foundation, of all things—I sympathized with the nobles about to be put through their paces. Ferdinand wouldn’t listen to any of their grievances. We would all need to do our best to pass.

“Furthermore,” he said, “there are several things I want you to make before the Archduke Conference.”

“You seem intent on using Ehrenfest’s ingredients, facilities, and personnel. Won’t that be a problem for Sylvester? You’re already dumping a lot on him, aren’t you?”

“He agreed to help us, no? I see no reason to give it any more thought. Focus instead on making Alexandria’s crest and dye for your cape.”

Most of my retainers were in Ehrenfest, and our plans would result in my active retinue getting even smaller. It certainly did sound easier for me to return to Ehrenfest and gather ingredients for brewing rather than fight for my life here in Alexandria.

“I shall provide detailed documents later,” Ferdinand said. “You must have a lot of unfinished business in Ehrenfest, and returning there will prove much harder once you have been recognized as Aub Alexandria. Use this opportunity to finish as much as you can.”

Indeed, there was so much I still needed to do, but Ferdinand was only saying all this so I wouldn’t feel guilty about returning to Ehrenfest.

Our conversation continued until we eventually arrived outside the teleportation hall.

“The dormitory will now be reopened,” Ferdinand announced. “This is necessary not only so we can stay in contact with Ehrenfest but also so that attendants can enter and start preparing for the Archduke Conference. Only the aub can open the teleportation hall and perform the initial unlocking of the dormitory. Rozemyne, do you know the process?”

“Yes, it was part of the archduke candidate course.”

I asked my retainers to stand down, then took the key to the foundation from a leather pouch at my hip and used it to open the teleportation hall. As I entered, I gazed around the dark room in search of the magic tool that would activate the circle.

As I suspected... It, too, is a feystone.

I reached out a trembling hand to touch it, repeating under my breath that I didn’t need to look. It was cold, and the slight chill gave me goose bumps.

Swallowing the shriek building up in my throat, I channeled my mana into the feystone. It wasn’t long before the magic circle at the center of the room lit up, making its presence known.

I-It’s done. I did it!

Feystones still scared me—tears had already welled up in my eyes—but I was relieved to have safely completed one of my duties as an aub entirely on my own.

“Now then...” Ferdinand said. “Henceforth, knights shall be stationed at the teleportation hall to serve as liaisons. Strahl gets along well with the knights of Old Ahrensbach, so I plan to leave the assignments and such to him. Rozemyne, will that be a problem?”

"Not at all. Strahl, I trust you to do your best. I anticipate a lot of back-and-forth between Ehrenfest and the Zent in the lead-up to the Archduke Conference, so contact me immediately in the event of an emergency."

I turned my attention to the knights who would guard the teleportation hall, spurring them to salute in acknowledgment of their orders. Ferdinand had introduced them to me as members of a faction Detlinde had abused. They looked tense but proud and were apparently moved to have seen my large-scale spell—in large part, I suspected, due to Hartmut's brainwashing.

"You, Lieseleta, and Cornelius will teleport first," Ferdinand told me. "Move to the waiting room when you arrive."

I stepped onto the teleportation circle with my two retainers and warped to the dormitory. Once there, we did as instructed and relocated to the nearby waiting room used primarily at the start and end of each academic term when massive groups of people needed to teleport. It was large and white and contained nothing of note.

"I see that Old Ahrensbach's teleportation hall and waiting room are identical to those found in the Ehrenfest Dormitory..." I mused aloud. "The building looked rather unique when we flew past it, but are all dormitories the same on the inside?"

"I don't know," Cornelius replied. "Tea party rooms are pretty distinct, but I've never been inside another duchy's dormitory before. Don't even think about wandering off to check; we were told to wait for Lord Ferdinand."

He must have seen me scooting closer to the door because he shot me an especially stern glare. I stayed put from that point onward, but it didn't quash my curiosity. No matter how much I tried to stay focused, my eyes kept wandering to the door.

Soon enough, Ferdinand arrived with Eckhart and Justus. "I made these registration brooches with the feystones you provided," he said. "Take them now. You will need them if you leave the dormitory."

"Hm? You made brooches?"

"Only for those coming here today. I do not have nearly enough for everyone scheduled to attend the Archduke Conference, so I will need to brew more upon my return.”

Lieseleta took one of the brooches and secured it to my cape for me. Now I could freely move in and out of the dormitory.

“Rozemyne, start by contacting Zent Eglantine,” Ferdinand said. “I prepared this letter to be sent in your name.”

I accepted and read through the letter in question. Written in Hartmut’s hand, it explained that we had eradicated the divine power wreaking havoc on my body and reopened our dormitory. It also stated the date of our entwickeln, asked when Eglantine planned to visit, and noted that we would station knights in the dormitory to relay her response.

I signed and sealed the letter, then used my schtappe to send it away to Anastasius’s villa. In the time it took me to do that, Ferdinand sent two letters of his own. I asked where they were headed.

“To the teleportation hall in the Ehrenfest Dormitory and to Raimund, who is in Hirschur’s laboratory. The former letter noted that we have reopened our dormitory and requested the schematics for the entwickeln. The latter was a summons to the tea party room.”

Ferdinand then extended a hand to me. I took it, and we exited the waiting room.

The hallway was as white as I was used to, but the carpet was purple, a color I’d seldom seen in Ehrenfest’s dormitory or castle. I supposed the teleportation hall we had just used was situated in a small tower by the main building because the path ahead of us quickly circled downward. It was a fun little distinction that really made it stand out.

“The main building is beyond this curve,” Ferdinand said.

“Wow!” I exclaimed as it came into view. “This dormitory has pots all over the place. Does the warmer climate mean they can use flowers as decoration even during the winter?”

“During the academic year, flowers are brought only for the Interduchy Tournament and the graduation ceremony. I still remember the previous

Archduke Conference, when Detlinde ordered that every single pot be decorated with them. It was a foolish endeavor if you ask me; the smell was strong enough to induce a headache, and several attendants had to waste their time tending to them."

Flowers would add a welcome splash of color to the dorm, but they made Ferdinand terribly uneasy. He explained that their scent could mask poison, their petals could carry it, and they could even be paired with poison that activated with water.

Good lord... Just how awful was his life in Ahrensbach?

"I do not plan to order any flowers this year," Ferdinand said. "Is that agreeable with you?"

"I don't care either way. Oh, but what about the people tasked with growing and preparing them? I wouldn't want to put anyone out of work." As the new aub, I wanted to avoid making changes that people would resent.

Ferdinand said that he would keep my wishes in mind and then directed my attention to our surroundings. "This is the dining hall. The tea party room is beyond it."

As we continued toward the tea party room, a white letter shot into the dining hall and dropped into my hands. It was a special tool Hartmut had made to accommodate my fear of ordonnanzes. I opened it and started to read.

"Lady Rozemyne, this is Judithe. I am at the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Is everything ready for me to leave?"

"Rozemyne, wait in the tea party room for Judithe to arrive. Lieseleta, reply by ordonnanz in her stead. I will go with Justus to unlock the dormitory."

Having doled out his instructions, Ferdinand opened the door to the tea party room, then unlocked the door to the central building and immediately made to leave.

"One moment, Lord Ferdinand," Lieseleta said. "I must ask to go with you. As my lady's head attendant, will it not be my duty to unlock the dormitory in preparation for the Archduke Conference? I remember Lord Norbert doing as much for Ehrenfest."

Ferdinand and Justus gave her awkward, sympathetic looks.

“As much as I appreciate your dedication,” Ferdinand said, “you are mistaken about something fundamental. Unlocking the dormitory is the duty of not the aub’s head attendant but the dormitory supervisor. I am only doing it now because Fraularm was fired and has yet to be replaced.”

“Oh...?”

“Professor Hirschur has a tendency to ignore messages from Ehrenfest,” Justus added. “Norbert, her uncle, unlocks the dormitory in her stead not because he is the aub’s head attendant but because he can drag her away from her research.” He gave the tea-set-laden trolley he was pushing a few light taps and concluded, “You should prioritize getting ready to welcome guests over learning to administer the dormitory.”

No sooner had the pair dropped that bombshell than they departed with Eckhart to unlock the rest of the dormitory.

PROFESSOR HIRSCHUUUR!!!

Our absentee supervisor had made us look like naive greenhorns.

“Professor Hirschur really is troublesome, isn’t she?” Lieseleta said with a sigh, looking at Cornelius and me. She then prepared an ordonnanz and clearly spoke her message: “Judithe, this is Lieseleta. Lady Rozemyne is waiting in the tea party room.”

We couldn’t exchange valuable documents out in the Royal Academy’s hallways, and the only viable place that Judithe, a citizen of Ehrenfest, could meet us was our tea party room. We started preparing to welcome her, and it wasn’t long before she arrived with the schematics.

“Wow, Lady Rozemyne! Your divine power really is gone! It was too strong for me to get anywhere near you, so I’m glad you’re back to normal.”

Judithe’s bright orange hair swayed as she hurried over to me, her violet eyes wide as saucers. It was nice to see her so excited; I’d wondered if everyone would be disappointed about me losing my divinity.

Lieseleta brewed tea while I accepted the entwickeln schematics from Judithe and spread them out on a nearby table. I could tell the Gutenbergs had checked them because they were marked with notes and minor alterations.

“The Gutenbergs were summoned to the temple, where Brunhilde handed them the schematics from Groschel and Alexandria and told them to make any changes they wanted and write down any concerns they had,” Judithe explained. “It must have been stressful for them. They really were put on the spot.”

Eep. Have I given Benno and the others a reason to be mad at me?

By attempting to honor their wishes, I might have made an even greater problem for them. Still, they *had* proposed some alterations, so the headache hadn’t been for nothing.

“I appreciate the update; now we can move forward with the entwickeln,” I said. “Please give Brunhilde and Sylvester my thanks for their support. And thank you, Judithe, for coming all the way here from the castle.”

“It wasn’t any trouble. I know things are getting busier with the Archduke Conference around the corner, so I’m just glad to be useful. I mean, I’m the only one without anything to do today. Philine is helping with Spring Prayer as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, and Damuel is guarding her. They should be back soon, I think...”

Melchior and his retainers were overseeing the temple, and Judithe had no reason to go there while Philine was absent. She generally had nothing to do but train in the castle.

“Bertilde and Ottilie are preparing to move your things,” she continued. “They have almost all of your unseasonable belongings ready to go. Oh, and they’re helping with preparations for the Archduke Conference. I’m technically supporting Brunhilde, but there isn’t much for an apprentice guard knight to do. The scholars and attendants, on the other hand...”

Judithe was my apprentice knight; she didn’t serve Brunhilde, which severely limited what she could do. Her only real duty at the moment was accompanying Brunhilde to the temple for her meetings with the merchants.

“Do let me know if you need any help in Ehrenfest,” she said. “I can do anything.”

“Certainly. I will tell Hartmut and the others to rely on you as well.”

Judithe took her leave around the same time that Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus returned from unlocking the dormitory. Raimund arrived a short while later. He must have been deeply immersed in his research because he looked sickly and uneasy on his feet.

“Lord Ferdinand, what in the world happened...?” Raimund asked. “First, Justus told me not to come back to the dormitory. Then Professor Hirschur saw some strange group and told me not to leave the laboratory. And now that I’m finally here, Lady Rozemyne is sitting in our tea party room...”

He was completely out of the loop. On second thought, maybe that was part of the reason he looked so pale. He didn’t know that I was his new aub or even that Eglantine had taken over as the new Zent.

“Seriously? You didn’t tell him anything?” I snapped, shooting Ferdinand an especially harsh glare. “Isn’t he your retainer?”

“Do you think we had the time? Besides, it was better to have him continue his research; he would not have been of much use to us in the castle. Or would you have rather I cast him aside, since his family issues would only have inconvenienced us when you were fighting for your life?”

As it turned out, our obsessive researcher’s family was a little on the problematic side. Returning him to the castle would only have caused us problems.

“Oh, no, let me stay in the laboratory!” Raimund interjected, desperately shaking his head. “Lord Ferdinand, I sincerely appreciate your consideration!”

“Aah...” I said with a nod; it was starting to make sense to me now. “He’s like Lasfam. You want to keep those who can’t keep themselves safe out of trouble.”

“We have, at last, weathered the storm,” Ferdinand said to Raimund, then handed the scholar a registration brooch. “Find a stopping point in your research and return to the castle if you wish to remain my retainer. You will need to clear out your room in Old Ahrensbach before the entwickeln and attend the new aub’s engagement ceremony.”

“Right. I’ll return to the castle with you. It’s been days since I made any real progress with my research, anyway.”

“I see. Be sure to inform Professor Hirschur.”

Having finished our business in the dormitory, we entrusted everything else to the knights in the teleportation hall and returned to the castle.

“Raimund, here are the schematics for our entwickeln,” Ferdinand said. “Deliver them to the scholars in my office and observe their delegation of work. Justus, tell Hartmut and Clarissa to join us in the aub’s office.”

From there, he took us to the back of the office and into a brewing room. The aub and their retainers came here to brew magic tools essential to the duchy’s operation, such as registration brooches.

“Later, we shall brew everything we will need for the Archduke Conference,” Ferdinand explained.

I was alone in the brewing room with Ferdinand and three of our retainers: Justus, Hartmut, and Clarissa. We had excluded the scholars of Old Ahrensbach because those not used to Ferdinand’s methods would get in our way at every turn, but the fact that only our name-sworn were present made me think he had other reasons too.

Like, the nobles here don’t know about my feystone phobia, for instance...

Incidentally, there were guard knights stationed outside the door to the brewing room, and my attendants were preparing a corner of the aub’s office for when we took lunch.

“Now then, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, lining up tools and ingredients on the brewing stand, “we need to brew the feystones to be exchanged at our engagement ceremony. Are you up to the task? If not, I can make yours for you.”

Wait, what? Is he proposing that he make his own engagement feystone?

I still remembered the joy on his face when I’d given him a protective charm.

He had said it was his first time ever receiving one. I couldn’t bear the thought of making him brew his own feystone for our engagement.

“I can manage this much, at the very least,” I replied. “On countless occasions, I’ve seen the negative consequences that arise from avoiding one’s duties. If I run away now, I could hardly call myself a good woman.”

“You sound assured, but one does not normally approach the creation of an engagement feystone like a knight going to war,” Ferdinand said, his expression tinged with worry. “Hold out your hand.”

Touched that he was being so considerate, I did as instructed. A small stone dropped onto my palm.

“This is a feystone taken from a regisch,” he said. “I picked one of a size befitting the avatar of a goddess. Knowing that it came from a scale should assuage your fear somewhat, no?”

“Thank you.”

I clenched the feystone in a trembling fist and started pouring mana into it, doing my best to avert my eyes. It was cold to the touch and sent a shiver down my spine, but I soldiered on; I needed to dye it with my own mana no matter how uncomfortable it made me. At least I wasn’t required to look at it.

“Take your time. Do not overdo it.”

“I won’t. But I refuse to lose to a feystone.”

As I glared down at my hand, Ferdinand sighed and gave my forehead several quick pokes. “You are too tense. Perhaps you should take a moment to consider the message you will engrave into your feystone before you start channeling mana into it.”

I didn’t even have a chance to respond; Ferdinand then sneered at me like he’d remembered something amusing and added, “Though I would advise not using that phrase you asked me about.”

“Obviously not!” I cried, blushing red. I wasn’t about to include such a direct invitation in my feystone—not now that I actually knew what it meant.

“Hmm. I am eager to see what you decide upon.”

Ferdinand turned away from me to instruct Justus, Hartmut, and Clarissa on how to create registration brooches. We needed enough for everyone attending the Archduke Conference and for those who would need access to the dormitory beforehand to get everything in order.

"As the aub, I should be making them myself," I said. "I apologize for thrusting this burden on the rest of you."

"The gold dust you provided is enough," Ferdinand replied. "And is the purpose of our engagement not for me to support you? Focus on the duties you *can* perform." I couldn't help but feel guilty that he was taking on my work, but it motivated me to make him the perfect engagement feystone.

I'll think of something so amazing it'll render him speechless!

I dyed the feystone, then picked up a piece of parchment. I needed to decide what kind of message to put in the engagement stone. During class, Hirschur had told us to choose something that reflected ourselves and would move our partners' hearts. I just wasn't sure what Ferdinand would want to hear.

I already vowed to make him a lab, so that won't do. Even something like "Let's be family" feels unnecessary at this point.

"Ngh..."

No matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn't come up with a single good idea. I was starting to think I should just put a generic "I wish to be your Goddess of Light" and call it a day.

"Lady Rozemyne, are you still debating what message to include?" Clarissa asked.

"Yeah... Can I ask what you carved into the feystone you gave Hartmut?"

"'Let us worship our goddess together,' of course."

I shouldn't have asked...

As I hung my head, Clarissa gave me a slight smile. "You won't find much use in other people's examples."

She was right about that. In this case, I'd gained absolutely nothing of value.

“Could you not simply write what you wish to do for him?” Clarissa pressed.

Just like that, a phrase suddenly came to mind. I used my schtappe-made stylus to scribble it down on my sheet of parchment. Ferdinand must have noticed my enthusiasm because he came over to check on me.

“Done, are you?” he asked.

“Now, now. No peeking.” I quickly hid the parchment and glared at him. “You’ll need to wait until the big day.”

He gave a wry smile, took a step back, and then turned away from me. Justus was smirking in my direction; I wanted to punch the stupid grin right off his annoying face.

“Would you like my assistance, Lady Rozemyne?” Hartmut asked.

“I can manage on my own, thank you. Even second-years are taught how to do this.”

I turned down help from Clarissa as well, then dropped the feystone into the brewing pot and channeled my mana into it. Ferdinand and I were both omni-elemental, so there was no need for me to fret about which elements I used.

Gold text arose within the rainbow feystone:

“Let me embroider your cape.”

Entwickeln

Inside the castle, rarely used rooms were stripped of their contents, including carpets and tapestries. This region seldom used carpets during the summer, in any case, so the attendants saw it as a chance to mix things up a little earlier than usual.

The nobles were in quite an uproar about having so little time to relocate their furniture; the entwickeln was only five days away. I was fine with it, since my chambers were still mostly bare, but it was yet another job on top of our preparations for the Archduke Conference. I was told that all sorts of documents were being moved to the dormitory.

Because of all the bustle, I was working in my archducal chambers; everything not used on a daily basis was being teleported to the giebes' estates and external storage buildings, so I would only have gotten in the way in the aub's office. My location also meant that bad actors couldn't approach me under the guise of work. For safety's sake, I was staying in these living quarters as much as I could, since only a strictly limited set of people could enter them.

"Lady Rozemyne, one of the knights stationed in the teleportation hall received this letter from Zent Eglantine about her visit," Clarissa announced as she came into my room, indicating a single letter atop the vast stack of documents she was carrying. "Otherwise, these need your signature, and these need to be looked over by Roderick. I have been told to assist you here until lunch."

I took Eglantine's letter from the mountain of paperwork upon which it rested. She planned to visit us two days after the entwickeln. Ferdinand had attached a note that said, "You may agree to this."

"Please send this confirmation letter to Zent Eglantine." I gave Clarissa my response and then started going through the other documents.

As it stood, Clarissa spent most of her time working in Ferdinand's office, but her top priority was ensuring the safe arrival of important documents. Retainers from Ehrenfest were inevitably looked down upon for being members of a lower-ranked duchy, but Clarissa, being from Dunkelfelger, encountered no such issues. She was better equipped to stand against the nobles of Old Ahrensbach and was a capable fighter to boot; I pitied whoever tried to steal the documents she was tasked with transporting. My knights were on edge because nobles were pulling all sorts of tricks to reach me.

"Lady Rozemyne, now that we have a date for the Zent's arrival, we can organize your engagement ceremony as well. Should we not inform Ehrenfest at once? Your parents and the archducal couple will surely want to attend. I propose asking Roderick to write the invitations."

"I concur," Roderick said timidly.

Clarissa's gaze was rather intense, for she was training Roderick in scholarly duties beyond just writing fiction. Preparing invitations was an appropriate task for him, so I decided to leave him to it.

"Lady Rozemyne, if the date of your engagement ceremony is decided, then what about your clothes?" Leonore asked. "Were you not going to retrieve some from Ehrenfest?" We didn't have time to make new ones, which greatly limited our options.

"I think the clothes I wore to my meeting with the royal family would work nicely—the ones made of both Ahrensbach and Ehrenfest-dyed cloth. What do you all think?"

Lieseleta gave an approving nod. "A most wonderful embodiment of your desire to unite Ehrenfest and Alexandria. And as they were designed to be worn around royalty, they will not look out of place at an engagement ceremony."

"Indeed," Gretia added. "They were made of the best cloth available, and you have the perfect hair ornament to go with them. I shall contact Lord Justus about preparing matching clothes for Lord Ferdinand." She wasted not another moment before sending an ordonnanz to him.

Of all the clothes to wear for my engagement... Ahaha.

A smile arose naturally on my face. Now that my lost memories had returned, I understood the significance of wearing a hairpin made by Tuuli and clothes made of cloth from both Ferdinand and my mom.

Clarissa smiled as well. “I am glad to see that your engagement to Lord Ferdinand brings you such joy.”

I almost corrected her but held my tongue. This wasn’t the time or place.

“Would you approve of making Lieseleta your feystone bearer?” Clarissa asked. I saw nothing wrong with the idea, so I turned to Lieseleta and asked if she would take the role.

“Um, hold on...” Roderick interjected. “Does that mean you decided on your engagement vow? Lord Ferdinand ordered me to inspect it.” He must have been chosen for being a talented author.

I turned away from the girls to meet Roderick’s gaze. “It is unfortunate, but no, I am still working on my vow. Rarely do women propose, so there are few sources I can draw from. I will need to reference the history of past queens, biblical verses, or perhaps Ehrenfest’s love stories, but which will work best? I suppose I should read them all to find out.”

The words of one’s proposal are deeply important, so... Yippee!

I made my signature “How troubling...” pose, though I couldn’t keep a smile from playing on my lips. My internal celebration was short-lived, however, as Roderick pulled me down from cloud nine.

“Fear not. Lord Ferdinand instructed me to walk you through your ideal proposal and draw from the bible in your place.”

“Oh, but that would be...”

Unsure how to continue, I turned to Lieseleta for assistance. She smiled, inspected a board, and said, “The words of a proposal are important for an engagement ceremony. But did Lord Ferdinand not say to focus on the entwickeln and ensure it can be performed without issue?”

“He did, but...”

“You have also been told to practice with an adult harspiel, as you have grown too much for your old one,” Leonore interjected. “Shall I summon Rosina?”

“Wait, Leonore. I wish to read, not practice the harspiel.”

Cornelius put a hand on my shoulder. “Good news. If you’re bored of paperwork, I was told to get you used to touching feystones without wincing. I doubt you’re going to read anytime soon.”

“Is that a grin?!” I spat. “I’m dying here and you’re *grinning*?!”

Hmph! Curse you, Ferdinand, and your never-ending contingencies!

I was so annoyed that I complained to Ferdinand all throughout our next meal together. He barely seemed to care and said only that there was no helping it when we had so much to do.

“No matter your motivation, there is no time for you to get absorbed in reading. But if you are patient, I will permit you to teach the scholars your Rozemyne Decimal System before the books are brought into the library made anew by the entwickeln. You may operate it as you please and according to whatever principles you wish.”

“Really?” I asked. He was always harping on about the trouble I caused when I followed my whims, so I certainly hadn’t expected this. “I won’t listen if you try to take it back later.”

“Yes, assuming the Archduke Conference concludes without incident.”

I committed that promise to memory and elected to put my all into my duties, even if they didn’t involve reading. That was easier said than done, though, as I was distracted with thoughts of and plans for my library. Rosina scolded me on more than one occasion, but I supposed there was no helping that.

We decided to hold the entwickeln on a sunny day when relocating furniture would be less of a problem. I’d just eaten breakfast and gotten dressed when my retainers spread out a sizable magic circle like the ones used to move taxes and started teleporting luggage and furniture... *somewhere*.

“Lady Rozemyne, do you have all that you need for the entwickeln?” Hartmut asked.

A pouch of gold dust I’d made with my divine power, the city’s schematics, the key to the foundation... I double-checked to make sure I wasn’t forgetting anything and then nodded.

“Wonderful. And your room has been fully cleared, correct?”

“It has. Let us leave with the others.”

My retainers carried out one final check, making sure my chambers really were empty. Then they filtered out into the hallway.

“We shall record the entwickeln with a magic tool,” Clarissa informed me.

I nodded and saw her off with a smile. Being in the foundation meant I wouldn’t get to see the entwickeln with my own eyes, but I didn’t want to miss the birth of my library city. I already knew from seeing Ferdinand create Hasse’s monastery in an instant that it was going to be a sight to behold.

“Still, actually making the city matters more than just seeing it appear,” I mused aloud. “Though this *is* my first time performing an entwickeln. I can’t help worrying that I might make a mistake of some kind...”

Despite having studied creation magic again and again, this was my first time actually using it. I could already feel my muscles tensing and my limbs going rigid. My nerves must have been fully on display as I gracelessly approached the door to the foundation.

“The key... The key...”

Aubs disguised the keys to their foundations so that others wouldn’t even recognize them. Ahrensbach’s was a buckle. According to Ferdinand, Detlinde had used it to fasten the belt from which she hung her highbeast feystone and potions.

I placed the buckle inside a pouch—the thought of seeing its feystone turned my stomach—then reached in and channeled mana into it. A key soon took shape in my hand.

The door to the foundation was a magical device of sorts. Unlocking and opening it revealed an opaque, iridescent barrier. I was so used to seeing them that I stepped through without the slightest hesitation and entered a space with white walls.

“Right, what do I need to do again?” I cast Grutrissheit to form my Book of Mestionora and reviewed what Ferdinand had taught me. “‘Push the key against the back wall, and doors will appear on the adjacent walls.’ Oh, there they are. Let’s see... ‘Under no circumstances should you insert the key into either keyhole. Instead, touch it against each feystone and supply them with mana.’” I took a moment to process the instruction and groaned, “Ugh, feystones.”

Swallowing my nerves, I touched the key to the feystones on the doors and channeled mana into them. Even though I was trying to avert my eyes, I couldn’t keep my hands from shaking.

Scary or not, this is better than touching them directly. Come on, Rozemyne! You can do this!

Once the feystones were full, a door appeared on the back wall. I ignored its obvious keyhole and supplied yet another feystone, trembling all the while.

“To think you get cursed if you try any of the keyholes...” I uttered under my breath. “Is that scary or what?”

Ferdinand had known about the traps and puzzles protecting the foundation and searched through Alstede’s memories to learn how to solve them. He had also checked with Detlinde for good measure but was reluctant to believe her answers.

I wouldn’t trust her either, but the fact he chose to peer into Alstede’s memories instead still speaks volumes.

As soon as the newest feystone was full, the door opened on its own. I stepped into the windowless white box that was the foundation’s hall.

Floating at the center of the room were seven feystones, each boasting one of the divine colors. They sparkled and expelled what appeared to be a fine powder; Ferdinand’s mana from the replenishment hall made it here without issue, it seemed. I took that as my signal to reach into my bag of gold dust.

“Now, let us begin.”

As per our plan, this entwickeln would rebuild the castle, the temple, the Noble’s Quarter, and a portion of the commoners’ lower city.

And the schematics for my library are based on the British Museum Reading Room. Eheheh... Heheheheh.

The new library built on the castle’s grounds would take the form of a magic circle. Antonio Panizzi had come up with the idea for the Reading Room in 1852, and now, all these years later, I was stealing his design for my own purposes. It wasn’t complete plagiarism, of course; I planned to add an extra section to house my chambers, where I would spend my days when I retired as the aub. The thought of becoming a live-in librarian like Solange made me look forward to getting old.

A suspended corridor would connect my library to the laboratory I was making for Ferdinand. I didn't know what he had in mind for his lab—I was just going to follow his schematics—but he'd discussed it extensively with his scholars, so I trusted it would suit his needs perfectly.

I made sure the schematics were within my reach, then grabbed a fistful of gold dust and started sprinkling it over the foundation. Using my other hand, I turned my schtappe into a pen and drew the sigils of the supreme gods in the air.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world—one who seeks to alter their design."

The gold dust in my hand rose into the air on its own and gathered on the tip of my stylus. It rimmed my magic circle, which grew larger and more complex with each movement I made. Then the circle spun and appeared in full above the foundation, where it shone with dazzling light.

"May the power to absorb be granted in the name of Schicksantracht the God of Darkness."

I swung my schtappe down, and the magic circle started to descend toward the foundation. An even brighter light enveloped me the moment the two met. I gripped the schematics and continued to pray.

"May the power to create be granted in the name of Versprechredi the Goddess of Light."

I opened my hands, and the schematics shot up into the air as if caught by a sudden gust of wind. Then they erupted in golden flame, burning from the center outward.

"Through prayer and with gratitude, I give you these fragments of life. May the divine couple grant their blessings and places of rest be added to the world."

I continually added mana and gold dust to the magic circle to prevent it from disappearing. My role as the aub was simply to keep it alive until it erupted with light and vanished.

This would definitely be more fun to watch from outside.

There was nothing for me to look at while casting the spell except the magic circle. Meanwhile, the rest of the duchy was getting to see an entire city being built in the blink of an eye. Aubs sure were handed the short end of the stick.

That said, some things need to be done before anyone else sees them.

Perhaps the greatest example was the creation of the path to the foundation, which was normally made only when a new duchy was founded. Ferdinand wanted me to completely remake ours, in large part because my name-sworn now knew about it. The Zent and the new aub would normally work together for this purpose, but there was no need when I already had my own Book of Mestionora.

“*Grutrissheit!*”

I took out two keys while looking at my Book of Mestionora. One was for entering the foundation through the aub’s chambers in the castle, and the other was for entering through the temple’s book room.

“The door in the temple’s book room can wait until we have bookshelves and a statue in place to disguise it, but the one in the castle needs to be ready for when I return.”

In the past, duchies prevented outsiders from stealing their foundations by ensuring that keys alone weren’t enough to enter their halls. They set up their own tricks and traps, the solutions to which aubs passed down to their successors. One could reach this foundation by ignoring the keyholes and pouring mana into some feystones, but other duchies required things like writing down a password or activating feystones in a particular order.

I wonder what we should do for Alexandria...

“I don’t want to touch feystones, so maybe a password would work better. How about ‘Urano Motosu’ in Japanese? Hmm... It wouldn’t be a problem for me, but my successors might find the kanji outright impossible.”

It was time to go back to the drawing board. An ideal password needed to be easy enough that I could pass it down but not so easy that it might one day be cracked. Not to mention, I would need to write it every time I entered the foundation’s hall, so making it less tedious was an absolute must. I couldn’t even discuss it with Ferdinand, since it had to be something known only to me.

“He said to make it something I want from future protectors of Alexandria—like a test to make sure I can leave the duchy in their hands—but... what would a library city expect from its aub?”

I pondered the question for a moment. Then I returned to the door, touched my Book of Mestionora, and selected a certain magic circle with my fingers.

“*Copy and place!*”

I copied the circle onto the door and pressed my key against it, causing Old Ahrensbach’s puzzles to disappear. It was time to create one of my own.

“Anyone who inherits my library system should at least know the five laws of library science. And they need to understand the ancient language so the Grutrissheit doesn’t go missing again.”

Knowing the ancient language would allow them to learn whatever else they needed to know from the Royal Academy’s library. Yurgenschmidt would never collapse as long as people were reaching Erwaermen.

For my question that would protect the foundation, I wrote, “What are Ranganathan’s five laws of library science?” in the ancient language. Then I penned the answer:

1. Books are for use.

2. Every person his or her book.

3. Every book its reader.

4. Save the time of the reader.

5. A library is a growing organism.

I wanted my successors to respect the proper way of operating a library and care about the process enough to know these answers by heart.

"Of course, I should also strive to uphold these rules. I can't yet give everyone equal access to books, but I hope the library can grow alongside Alexandria."

Once I'd confirmed that the puzzle worked as intended, I needed to decide on the penalty for failure. Ahrensbach's curse seemed pretty scary to me, but almost every other punishment listed in the Book of Mestionora was horrifyingly violent. Dart shooters and collapsing ceilings were among the least gruesome options. I was surprised aubs let their successors anywhere near the foundation.

"I guess a curse really is the most peaceful choice. Better to leave your victim on the brink of death than kill them outright. Or is it more cruel, since they're stuck with that pain for the rest of their life? Ugh, this sucks... I can't believe there's no option to just shoo them away... I'm no good with these kinds of decisions, and it won't let me leave without choosing a punishment."

In the end, I opted to stick with a curse. I copied one from the Book of Mestionora and pasted it where it needed to be.

"Done at last..."

I exited the foundation's hall, exhausted, and closed the door behind me. Then I took out one of the paper-based communication devices Hartmut had made to circumvent my fear of ordonnanzes and set about folding it into a simple airplane. Ferdinand had told me to contact him once the entwickeln was complete.

Beyond the now frameless window stretched a city of pure white. It matched the schematics to the last detail—as expected—so I already knew where to find the library. Its domed roof caught my eye immediately.

"This is it... My library city."

My heart was so full that tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't even begin to describe my happiness. This feeling wasn't something to be relished alone; I wanted to share it. I wanted to cheer with the people who had so graciously helped me and start discussing the future with no holds barred.

I took a moment to admire my library before throwing the paper airplane out the window. I watched it soar through the air as it beelined to Ferdinand, who soon approached on his highbeast with our retainers in tow.

Eglantine’s Visit

Now that we’d completed the entwickeln, our new priorities were Zent Eglantine’s visit and the engagement ceremony. The books for my library were still tucked away in their boxes, stacked in a storeroom until the time came for me to put them on their shelves. It stung that I couldn’t start at once, especially when the library was so close by. My hands were too full with my duties as the aub and the preparations for the engagement ceremony that needed to be seen to before the new Zent arrived.

Aah, my library... Sadness blankets me.

Ferdinand was doing most of the work—choosing the dates, assigning the guards to their stations, and so on. As the archduchess, I was tasked with observing everything and getting to grips with my duties.

“Lady Rozemyne, we have finalized the details for Lady Eglantine’s visit,” Clarissa announced, then handed me a document. “Take a moment to read this schedule, if you would. Lord Ferdinand would like you to memorize it. Leonore and Cornelius are in a meeting with the Knight’s Order to discuss security on the day of.”

Eglantine was slated to arrive at fourth bell. I would go to the border gate to welcome her and then teleport us to the castle, where we would eat lunch before discussing the upcoming engagement. Once she had acknowledged the engagement, I would destroy the medals belonging to the prisoners being kept in the Sovereignty as a faux “practical exam.” We would then return to the border gate by highbeast, allowing our new Zent a chance to compare Alexandria’s schematics to Ahrensbach’s and confirm that the Lanzenave Estate was gone.

Sounds pretty hectic...

“Lady Rozemyne, we have here your new clothes from Ehrenfest,” Gretia said, indicating the garments made by Elvira’s personnel. She and Lieseleta had gone to fetch them from the Royal Academy. “Let us decide what you will wear tomorrow.”

“Philine is back from Spring Prayer,” Lieseleta informed me while she worked. “Gerlach was in quite a sorry state from the recent battle there, but returning the stolen mana with the chalices and completing Spring Prayer as usual caused the land to mostly recover.”

In other words, the commoners wouldn’t be disadvantaged. I was relieved to hear it. “Now they need a new Giebe Gerlach.”

“Ehrenfest will see to that after the Archduke Conference. We, too, will need to formally decide on new giebes.”

I continued to pick out clothes and accessories for Eglantine’s visit, received a report from Leonore and Cornelius when they finished their meeting with the Knight’s Order, and read more documents that Clarissa brought me. Time passed in the blink of an eye.

It was almost fourth bell, and the Zent was due to arrive. I was waiting on top of the border gate with Ferdinand and our guard knights.

As someone used to Ehrenfest, I couldn’t help but notice the heat. It was hot enough to be summer, and the sun was so bright that one had to wonder whether it was slowly closing in on us. No wonder people had taken to wearing veils here. It was a good thing Lieseleta had made one for me at the advice of one of Letizia’s attendants.

The country gate shone almost as soon as fourth bell rang. Eglantine’s retainers streamed out of the door on its side and took to the sky ahead of Anastasius and the Zent, who were the last to leave. Eglantine held up her Grutrissheit and closed the gate behind them.

As soon as our new arrivals landed in front of us, everyone knelt except Eglantine and me. I started to kneel as well, but she raised a hand to stop me.

“Lady Rozemyne. Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting.”

“I appreciate you taking time out of your extremely busy schedule to visit us,” I replied. “I realize the Archduke Conference is fast approaching.”

Eglantine's countenance had changed. She wore the same peaceful smile, but her eyes were sharper, and the princessly aura she had once exuded was gone.

For her to have changed this much in such a short time, the duties of a Zent must be brutal.

"Zent Eglantine, today's schedule is as we conveyed," Ferdinand said, drawing me back from my thoughts. "I would ask that you follow us in teleporting to the castle."

I pressed a hand against the teleportation circle I'd preemptively copied and pasted onto the border gate's roof, and the Sovereign knights expressed their surprise when it arose out of seemingly nowhere. We asked them to stand atop it, and away we went.

We finished our lunch—fish, in true Ahrensbach fashion—and then relocated to the aub's office. Our attendants poured tea while Ferdinand activated an area-wide sound-blocker around the two of us, Eglantine, and Anastasius.

"That meal was beyond excellent," Eglantine said. "I have eaten Ahrensbach cuisine during Archduke Conferences and the like, but never has it tasted so flavorful."

I nodded in agreement. "Though it might inconvenience the people of Ahrensbach, my spice tolerance is unfortunately low. My chefs have been preparing my food using Ehrenfest methods, incorporating spices little by little in an attempt to find the right balance."

Anastasius looked as satisfied as Eglantine, which made for a peaceful atmosphere. I thought he'd simply enjoyed the food, but he gazed over at his wife and said, "Eglantine has barely eaten for days. I was glad to see her have her fill."

Even now, she's his entire world, isn't she?

In some regards, it was a tad exasperating. But I could see why he was worried about Eglantine when her countenance had changed so much.

"The duties of a Zent must be strenuous," I remarked.

“Indeed...” Eglantine replied with a smile. “In this short time, I have seen much that escaped my notice before or was completed without my involvement. I have also realized there is much for which I must apologize to you and Lord Ferdinand.”

Somehow, her response made my heart ache. Apologizing wouldn’t change the past, but part of me wanted to trust her again.

Ferdinand smiled as though he’d just read my mind. “Not even the supreme gods can change the past, but their blessings might bring about a brighter future,” he said. “To that end, we have several documents for you to sign.”

In other words: “Your sins remain, so put your money where your mouth is.” Eglantine would need to prove her remorse by approving our engagement and permitting Ferdinand to attend the Archduke Conference.

She looked over the documents, then placed a hand on her cheek and gave him a quizzical tilt of the head. “Your engagement to Lady Rozemyne is the result of a royal decree. As long as the decree remains, my approval is not necessary.”

“Your signature will provide even further legitimacy. I wish to make it clear to other duchies that royal decrees are not undone by the crowning of a new Zent.”

Eglantine looked unconvinced, but she cast stylo nonetheless. “I take no issue with signing your documents. I will admit, though, I thought the purpose of my visit was to accelerate your Starbind Ceremony.”

“Excuse me?!” I exclaimed. How had she reached *that* conclusion?

“You let winter arrive early to purge the divine mana from your body. Do you not wish to accelerate your Starbind Ceremony in turn?”

GYAAAH! SHE MISUNDERSTOOD THE SITUATION JUST AS I THOUGHT SHE WOULD!

“That’s not true!” I cried. “I did no such thing!”

“Calm down, Rozemyne.”

“How can I be calm when she’s so gravely mistaken? She thinks we... we...”

She thought we were trying to *accelerate our Starbinding*! Calming down wasn't an option when I was so close to dying of embarrassment. What was one supposed to do at a time like this?

"Lady Eglantine, I did not accelerate the arrival of winter," Ferdinand stressed. "I dyed Rozemyne with a certain kind of potion. As you should understand, the arrival of winter would not have dyed another in such a short period."

"Yes, it certainly was quick..." she replied.

Winter this, winter that... Can we please *move on?!*

I wasn't the only one agonizing—Anastasius moved to stop Eglantine with an anxious look on his face. "If we've misunderstood, then we can hold to tradition and schedule Rozemyne's Starbind Ceremony for after she comes of age. Now, enough of this! Say no more about the speed of her dyeing!"

"Very well," Eglantine replied with a smile. "Lord Ferdinand, does this mean you will obey the rest of the decree? As I am sure you remember, Lord Trauerqual ordered you to raise and educate Lady Letizia to be the next Aub Ahrensbach."

I turned to look at him as well. I wanted to know his intentions with Letizia as much as anyone.

"We see no reason for Alexandria to inherit Ahrensbach's traditions, so Letizia will remain an archduke candidate even after Rozemyne has been recognized as the archduchess. I plan to follow the decree and give her the education of an aub. And when I am Starbound, I will not hesitate to adopt her."

To live as a noble, Letizia needed someone to support her. Ferdinand would adopt her if she carried out her duties as an archduke candidate and would even consider her as our successor if she displayed the necessary talents.

I'm glad he doesn't intend to punish her.

"However"—Ferdinand gave Eglantine the same thin smile he wore when about to unload some especially tedious work—"as Ahrensbach will soon disappear, it is currently beyond me to make her Aub Ahrensbach. And the decree said nothing about making her the next Aub Alexandria."

I elected to watch in silence. The less unnecessary work he had to do, the better.

"We can still meet the terms of the decree," Ferdinand continued. "Lord Trauerqual could name his new duchy 'Ahrensbach,' and Letizia could become its aub after marrying Lord Hildebrand. You could also give the name to an entirely new duchy to be bestowed upon Letizia when she comes of age."

Anastasius gave a slight grimace, aware of the burden both proposals would put on the royal family. "Could we not just nullify that aspect of the decree?"

Ferdinand returned a venomous smile as he gazed upon both of our guests. "We could, but it would undermine all other royal decrees if people saw the ease with which it was overturned. I would rather Lord Trauerqual and the rest of the royal family bear the weight of the orders they so freely made."

My mistake. It wasn't the smile he wears when dumping work on others—it was his revenge *smile.*

I averted my eyes as Eglantine and Anastasius paled. Given all the trouble they'd made for Ferdinand, I wasn't opposed to them getting a taste of their own medicine. As long as it didn't hurt Letizia, I wanted them to reap what they'd sown with this royal decree.

"Have you finished investigating the criminals?" Ferdinand asked.

"Indeed..." Eglantine replied. "Just as Ehrenfest and you warned, the usage of trug was rampant. We had a hard time with many of them, as their most important memories were clouded and obscured, but we are done."

Going through Detlinde's and the other Ahrensbach nobles' memories had apparently been quite an ordeal. Detlinde had complained to no end about her treatment, attempting to leverage her status as "the country's next Zent," and then cried foul when she learned that Eglantine had already obtained the Grutrissheit. The person tasked with reading her memories had deemed it a truly miserable experience.

"We have brought with us a list of the nobles we investigated," Eglantine said. "We plan to spread them throughout the country to be used as mana sources. Lady Rozemyne, if you would destroy their medals."

Anastasius met my eye and said, “Rest easy—it is the same as what is practiced at the Royal Academy.” He then handed over the list, which comprised not only the criminals’ names but also their blood stamps.

“I could never rest easy when doing such grave work,” I replied.

Ferdinand passed me the box of medals he had prepared. I glared at it intensely while he and the others took their distance. Once they were all outside the range of the sound-blocker, I pressed my schtappe against the sheet of paper Anastasius had set down and chanted the relevant spell.

“*Auswahl.*”

As the names on the list shone, their medals flew out of the box. I took them in my hand, squeezed my eyes shut, and exhaled.

“*Grutrissheit.*”

I made my Book of Mestionora and used my duplication spell to create the magic circle I needed. Eglantine watched me closely from outside the sound-blocker; she was serving as my instructor, but it was also her duty as the Zent to face what she did not want to see. In the same vein, I, the aub, had to make sure these criminals were punished.

“O mighty and supreme God of Darkness, who rules the endless skies; O mighty Father who created the world and all things. In the name of Schicksantracht, may those who transgressed against the Goddess of Light be punished.” I cast the medals into the magic circle, and a black mist formed. They stuck fast and started to burn. “I beseech you, close the towering stairway to the distant heights.”

Once the medals were fully destroyed, Eglantine and the others reentered the sound-blocker. “Splendid work,” she declared. “You have passed your practical exam.”

Anastasius grimaced and stared daggers at Ferdinand. “You made it a test? Are you insane?”

I was in total agreement, but we needed a third party other than Ferdinand to confirm that I understood the Royal Academy’s curriculum and possessed the skills necessary to apply my knowledge.

“Now, when we decree Lady Rozemyne the new Aub Alexandria, no one should protest that she is underage,” Eglantine noted.

Indeed, these tests would silence those who tried to argue that I couldn’t perform the duties of an aub without graduating. I actually felt sorry for anyone invested in opposing my assignment, for not only had my strict teacher Ferdinand crammed the entire curriculum into my head a year and a half ago, but I also had the Book of Mestionora. I was far more confident in my abilities than most aubs, who rose to power decades after graduating and remembered almost nothing from their time in the Royal Academy.

“You settled on ‘Alexandria’ as your new duchy’s name, but what about its color and crest?” Eglantine asked. “When will you supply the cape to be given to the aub during the Archduke Conference?”

“We have yet to finish making the dye, so the cape should arrive just before the conference,” Ferdinand replied. “You will not need to take time out of your schedule for it. Our retainers will take care of everything.”

Once my engagement ceremony was over, I would need to gather ingredients from the Royal Academy and create the dye for my cape.

“Very well. Inform me when the cape and crest are complete,” Eglantine said. “What became of the Lanzenave Estate and its teleportation circle? We must know before we can move in to our new living quarters.” They wouldn’t be at ease until they’d ruled out the risk of another invasion.

“Here are the relevant schematics,” Ferdinand said, taking out schematics for both Ahrensbach and Alexandria. He explained where the Lanzenave Estate had once stood and how we had changed that part of the city. “You may observe it with your own eyes on our way back to the border gate.”

Eglantine and Anastasius nodded. They wanted to be sure that the estate was gone and that we had severed its connection to the villa.

We climbed into my highbeast and took flight. This was my first time seeing the city from above; I’d started sleeping in the newly made castle, but I spent all my time in the aub’s living quarters to make life easier for my knights.

Oh, right. Not all of the city has been remade yet.

We had prioritized the castle, the library, the laboratory, the Noble’s Quarter, the temple, and the most important parts of the lower city. We planned to finish the rest gradually to lessen the burden on the commoners.

“The Lanzenave Estate once stood in that corner over there,” Ferdinand said, pointing.

Anastasius checked the map to make sure. In the newly made city of Alexandria, a normal part of the Noble’s Quarter sat in its place.

“Indeed, the teleportation circle is gone,” Eglantine said, having taken out her Grutrissheit to confirm there were no human-transporting circles in the area. Her last objective for her visit had now been completed.

We circled above the city and then headed straight to the border gate.

“I did not think you would already be done with your entwickeln,” Anastasius remarked when we touched down atop the gate, clearly impressed. “You might have excluded some areas, but it must have been quite the task.”

“A shining example of Lady Rozemyne’s excellence, no?” Eglantine asked with a smile.

“Ferdinand deserves your praise more than I do,” I said. “He made all the arrangements; I merely followed his instructions.”

“Oh my.” Eglantine’s eyes widened in genuine shock. “Does that mean *Lord Ferdinand* designed this city with a library at its center?”

“Indeed. He always makes my wishes come true.” I thrust out my chest with pride and declared, “My Ferdinand truly is phenomenal.”

Eglantine looked up at Ferdinand and giggled. She waited patiently while I continued to lavish him with praise—causing him to grimace—and then said, “I really must return to Alexandria when its construction is complete.”

I nodded in agreement. “By then, we should have finished our entwickeln for the lower city. The temple classrooms should hopefully have opened, the library should be thriving from all the compulsory book donations, and there should be extra laboratories dedicated to feyplants, feybeasts, and feyfish.”

We had performed a hurried entwickeln, since we’d needed to destroy the

Lanzenave Estate and heal the wounded Noble's Quarter, but there was plenty more for us to do.

"I will not settle for hopes and dreams," I declared. "My desires will be realized. Isn't that right, Ferdinand?"

"Yes... Perhaps one day..." he replied.

Anastasius placed a hand on his wife's shoulder, wearing an unreadable expression. "Let us go, Eglantine. I would rather we not hang around."

"Oh my... But is this not simply heartwarming?" She took out her magic tool Grutrissheit and prepared to open the country gate. "Well then, Lady Rozemyne... until the Goddess of Time weaves our threads together again."

Engagement Ceremony

It was the day of my engagement ceremony. My attendants had applied a thin layer of makeup to my face, secured my hair behind my head, and put both my hairpin from Tuuli and my rainbow-feystone-decorated hair stick neatly in place. The ornaments jingled next to my ears.

Several attendants gathered to help me put on my dress—a jade-green skirt paired with cloth of a paler hue. It was very appropriate for spring and reminded me of newly sprouted plants. I pinched up some of the material, then let go and watched as it fell daintily into place.

Next was my veil, which my attendants secured with pins. We were under no obligation to follow Old Ahrensbach's traditions, but I wished to make it clear that I planned to respect its culture going forward. The veil was a very light shade of blue, the color of my birth season, and trimmed with golden lace.

They've dressed me like a bride... I shouldn't be surprised—this is an engagement ceremony and all—but... Gah, I can't bear to think about it. I'm embarrassed enough already!

"You look beautiful, Lady Rozemyne."

"Lord Ferdinand will surely be speechless."

Lieseleta and Gretia directed my attendant hopefuls to put away the makeup brushes and prepare my shoes, among other things. Clarissa entered while they were hard at work.

"Nobles are gathering in the castle, Lady Rozemyne. The giebes have all arrived. Some are looking around the new castle."

"I thought we announced that giebes would not need to attend, as the date was decided so suddenly..." I wished we could have opted for a more private ceremony—too large a crowd would only make me nervous—but aubs were essentially required to invite the nobles of their duchy.

"Oh my!" Clarissa exclaimed. "No one would pass up an opportunity to see the young woman who is both the new aub and the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, healer of the duchy!" She was breathing heavily with excitement, but only she and Hartmut cared about that side of things.

Or, well... I prayed that was the case.

"Speaking of which, Clarissa—have Sylvester and the others arrived yet?"

"Yes. The archducal couple, the knight commander, Lady Elvira, and Lord Bonifatius are all present." Ferdinand had used my feystones to welcome them at the border gate.

In the run-up to the Archduke Conference, few top-ranking nobles could afford to spend days away from their duchy for the sake of a mere engagement ceremony. My family had more leeway than most thanks to all the feystones packed with divine mana back in Ehrenfest and the added convenience of teleportation, but even then, they barely had time to attend the ceremony.

"Oh, also—Damuel is here as Lord Bonifatius's guard knight. The minors had to stay home. Philine and Judithe looked so very envious when they watched the others depart."

In other words, I would need to bring them back some top-of-the-line souvenirs. I asked Clarissa to see to it for me.

"If you are ready, Lady Rozemyne, then let us present you to your Ehrenfest guests," Leonore prompted. "Your parents and adoptive parents must be thrilled to see you; this might be your last chance to speak freely with each other."

I nodded. Our reunion was destined to be brief, as they would all need to teleport back to Ehrenfest as soon as the engagement ceremony was over. The recent war, my stealing Ahrensbach's foundation, and my choosing a new Zent as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora all meant that preparing for the next Archduke Conference was going to be brutal.

Of course, the newly founded Alexandria was much, *much* busier than Ehrenfest. Even if Sylvester had wanted to stay longer, we wouldn't have been able to host an aub for several days.

"Goodness, Rozemyne. My congratulations on your engagement!" Elvira exclaimed, her voice bright and cheery. “How especially beautiful you look today!”

Everyone else joined her in praising my outfit.

“Indeed, Elvira is correct,” Florencia said. “You have grown prettier and more feminine since last I saw you.”

“It’s a miracle what a little makeup can do,” Sylvester added. “Too bad the illusion will shatter as soon as she opens her mouth.”

I thanked Florencia, then glared at Sylvester. “I could say the same for you. The moment you speak, I wonder why anyone thought to put you in the aub’s clothes.”

“Now, now, Lord Sylvester...” Elvira interjected. “Rozemyne’s beauty is not only thanks to her makeup—she sparkles like the Goddess of Light upon at last obtaining her God of Darkness. And with that said, Rozemyne... Might I ask the circumstances behind you and Lord Ferdinand making your hearts one?”

Yep, I recognize that gleam in her eye. Mother is in her element.

I could already feel the pressure as she attempted to draw me into an interrogation. It was time for an evasive maneuver, so I turned to Karstedt standing next to her.

“I see you are not dressed as a knight today.”

“Because I am here as your father,” Karstedt replied. “I never thought a daughter’s engagement ceremony could be so conflicting. This is nothing like when my sons had theirs. Back then, I was just proud they had safely come of age, and the sight of their fiancées did little to move me. But now...”

He paused, then let out a quiet sigh. “It brings me great comfort to know you are marrying Ferdinand, not being adopted into the Sovereignty. And—”

“It brings me NO comfort!” came a booming roar from nearby. “Why, Rozemyne?! Why Ferdinand?! Were there not far better options?!”

“Father, enough already! Give it up!”

There was a brief confrontation as Karstedt attempted to contain his rampaging father. Bonifatius’s guard knights joined in, attempting to calm their lord, but not even their combined forces were enough to stop him.

"I apologize for my father causing a scene," Karstedt said at last. "We wanted him to stay home, but... Lord Wilfried insisted on holding the fort for the day."

Was this an act of consideration meant to compensate Bonifatius for not being allowed to attend the transference ceremony? Under better circumstances, I might have seen it as a kind gesture, but the former knight commander's indignant rant just made me think, "Screw you, Wilfried." I certainly wasn't the only one.

"You said you weren't in love with him!" Bonifatius roared at me. "Was that a lie?!"

"No, obviously not. My feelings haven't changed."

Everyone gasped and stared at me in shock. Though not a word was spoken, I could hear them collectively scream, "What the hell are you even saying?!" Sensing all the sharp rebukes about to rain down on me, I quickly attempted to backpedal.

"U-Um, what I mean to say is that I've yet to understand romantic love. As for Ferdinand, he simply wishes for us to be family. He is perfectly content with keeping things the way they are and does not expect the more intimate aspects of a relationship from me. In that sense, this engagement exists merely for us to become family in name as well as spirit."

Everyone was watching me so intently. Was that explanation not good enough? The silent pressure prompted me to take a step back.

"So you got engaged to satisfy his wishes?" Bonifatius asked, his blue eyes narrowed. "I care about you, Rozemyne; I could never permit such a one-sided arrangement."

"Rest assured, Grandfather—it will grant my wishes too. No other man would go to such great lengths to make my dreams come true. Not to mention, his presence calms me; I feel none of the displeasure that characterized my engagements with Wilfried and Lord Sigiswald."

Bonifatius and Sylvester both cradled their heads and let out heavy sighs. Was it something I said? Maybe romantic love really was necessary for engagements and weddings and the like. I worried that Sylvester might tell me to give up on marrying Ferdinand, so I appealed to him with tears in my eyes.

“This engagement might be the result of a royal decree, but I made Lord Ferdinand a laboratory and intend to both donate mana to his research and come up with tasty meals for him so he stays healthy. I care about his happiness—that much I can promise you—so... please do not intervene.”

There was a drawn-out pause before Florencia smacked Sylvester’s arm and said, “Do not make her uneasy before her engagement.”

“I wasn’t even *going* to get involved,” he shot back. “I was looking back on everything I’ve done up to this point, and, well... Rozemyne, I entrust my little brother to you.”

From there, Elvira’s group congratulated me on the engagement, as did everyone’s retainers. Matthias and the others gave standard blessings, but Damuel seemed just as uncertain as his charge.

“I realize this is a day to be celebrated, but the thought of you and Lord Ferdinand getting engaged seems strange to me...” he said. “It doesn’t help that I’ve known you since before your baptism.”

“Oh my. By that logic, are things between you and Philine not strange too?” I asked in response. He had known her since her baptism.

Damuel nodded again and again. “They are. They most certainly are!”

Hm? How unusual...

I was used to him dismissing such implications for fear of upsetting Philine. For him to have actually agreed with me this time, something about their dynamic must have changed.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” Cornelius said. “If you wish to be engaged to Lord Ferdinand, then I give you my blessing as your elder brother. Just don’t let your inertia lead you astray—there are times when you must be firm with him.” I could guess from the concern in his eyes that he was worried about winter arriving early for me.

“You have nothing to fret about,” I declared. “Ferdinand would never do something so crude. And while I appreciate your concern, Cornelius, has Leonore been as firm with you?”

“How is that relevant?” He averted his eyes and repeated that it was important to stand one’s ground.

Ooh... Looking away now, are we? I wonder what that means.

I was eager to hear Leonore’s take on what it meant to be a prim and proper fiancée.

Once I’d greeted our guests from Ehrenfest, I moved to the grand hall with my retainers. It was already full of nobles—as many as one might expect from a greater duchy with such a large population. I wondered how much larger the turnout might have been not too long ago, before so many Old Werkestock nobles were taken out of the picture.

Ngh... Their eyes are boring into me.

I approached the stage as the new aub. Our guests were watching my every move, and their gazes were so intense that I could actually feel the pressure on my back as I climbed the steps with Lieseleta, the holder of my engagement feystone, and Leonore, my representative guard knight. My other retainers were waiting below.

“I am a little nervous,” I whispered. “I was not expecting anywhere near this many attendees.”

Lieseleta replied with a quiet chuckle, “Even more people will attend your inauguration during the Archduke Conference. Nobles from all duchies shall want to see you.”

We took our assigned seats, at which point Ferdinand and his retainers entered the hall.

“Are those new clothes?” I mused aloud.

“Yes, made in the style of Ahrensbach,” Lieseleta said. “Lord Ferdinand must be making considerations for the nobles gathered today.”

His especially large sleeves didn’t quite suit the comparison, but the rest of the ensemble brought to mind clothes from the historic kingdom of Georgia back on Earth. It really suited his tall stature. His outfit was a darker shade of green than my own, and the yellow sash draped loosely around his shoulders was dyed in Ehrenfest's new style.

I was on the right side of the stage, so Ferdinand would take the left. He approached with Justus, his feystone bearer, and Eckhart, his representative guard knight, wearing his brightest smile for our public-facing engagement. Hartmut waited for him to sit down before moving to the center of the stage.

Normally, it was the aub's duty to oversee engagements between members of the archducal family. We had entrusted the role to my retainers; I couldn't conduct my own ceremony, and my family comprised nobles from another duchy. Hartmut had assured us that only he was capable of taking the reins, but I still worried what he might do.

"By royal decree, Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne are to be engaged," he announced, unrolling the documents Eglantine had signed and presenting them for all to see. "Under normal circumstances, engagements are recognized during the Archduke Conference and then formalized alongside the Starbind Ceremony. In our case, the engagement must take place *before* the conference, so Zent Eglantine visited our humble duchy early to grant her approval."

Hartmut launched into an explanation for the nobles who had remained in their provinces and were thus unaware of recent developments. He gave long-winded accounts of the Purge of Lanzenave, the battle for the Sovereignty, and the large-scale spell performed by the Divine Avatar of Mestionora.

Here we go...

I braced for a fanatic speech about my "divinity" or some such, but one never came. Hartmut smiled and said, "You may now exchange feystones."

Ferdinand and I stood up at the same time. I turned to Lieseleta and Leonore, nodded, and advanced to the center of the stage as elegantly as I could. Ferdinand was doing the same. Each step brought us closer together until we were within arm's reach, whereupon he leisurely knelt before me. Eckhart and Justus followed suit, keeping their heads bowed.

"Here you are, Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta said. She held out the box containing my engagement feystone and, upon confirming that everyone was in place, opened it. I plucked out the feystone and took a deep breath.

“My God of Darkness, the guidance of the supreme gods in the heavens above brought about this engagement. Spring arrived with Verdrenna’s thunder, and Bluanfah began her dance. As the sprouts turned vibrant green, I felt Leidenschaft guide me...”

As our resident author, Roderick had written my vows for me. I understood the first line—a reiteration that I was here by royal decree and that my engagement couldn’t easily be overturned—but the rest was too tough for me to decipher. I’d wanted to say something that would communicate my immense gratitude to Ferdinand and ask him to keep guiding me, so why was Bluanfah whirling around and the God of Darkness flourishing his cape and sleeves? Even when I was memorizing the words before the ceremony, I’d suspected that my writer had gone rogue.

Despite my misgivings, my retainers had all deemed the vows perfect for an engagement ceremony. Our audience must have agreed; I could see people giving nods of approval and sighing in awe. I wasn’t talented enough to stray from the script and translate my feelings into religious allusions—especially not on the spot—so my only option was to press on.

“I seek to brighten your world and so offer you this feystone, my God of Darkness.”

Engraved within the feystone were the words “Let me embroider your cape.” It was the best way I could think to translate “Let’s be family” into noble speech, as cape embroidering was a task done only by a person’s loved ones.

As I understood it, when Ferdinand entered the temple, Veronica had confiscated the cape his father had given him. He had sincerely appreciated it when Sylvester gave him a new one, though you wouldn’t have guessed it by how much he complained about its poor defenses. Taking his desires into account, I wanted to give him a cape that only a true family member could prepare.

Ferdinand accepted the feystone, read the message inside, and then inhaled. For a moment, his fake smile gave way to an expression of pure joy. Even when his false countenance returned, he continued to hold the feystone tight. I couldn’t help but chuckle in response.

“I will choose the design...” he muttered, his lips curled into a frown. I couldn’t decide whether to sweetly request that he make it a simple one or double down and remark on his ears being red.

“Lord Ferdinand,” whispered Justus.

Ferdinand glanced over his shoulder. He carefully returned my feystone to its box before retrieving his own.

“Divine Avatar of Mestionora and my Goddess of Light, your radiance dispels the darkness and shines without end. Lost in Chaocipher’s swaying veil, I was powerless to save my Geduldh. I could only wait for Ewigeliebe’s sword to fall. But then you appeared, my Goddess of Light. You tore through the gloom and brought order to chaos.”

His slew of metaphors took me by surprise. If only he’d written them down so I could actually take the time to decipher them.

Each of the gods had several meanings associated with their name. I couldn’t work out which ones Ferdinand was referring to—not when they were appearing in such quick succession—but I could extrapolate from everyone’s reactions that this was a profound declaration of love. Elvira’s eyes sparkled, and other women clasped trembling hands over their mouths.

He compared me to the All-Shining Goddess of Light, the All-Changing Goddess of Water, the All-Protecting Goddess of Wind, and the All-Embracing Goddess of Earth. Every single one of the main goddesses, then. It seems so excessive that I don’t know what to think.

“I offer you this feystone, my Goddess of Light.”

Ferdinand then held out his omni-elemental engagement feystone. I accepted it and read the golden text inside.

“I will protect Alexandria and you with it.”

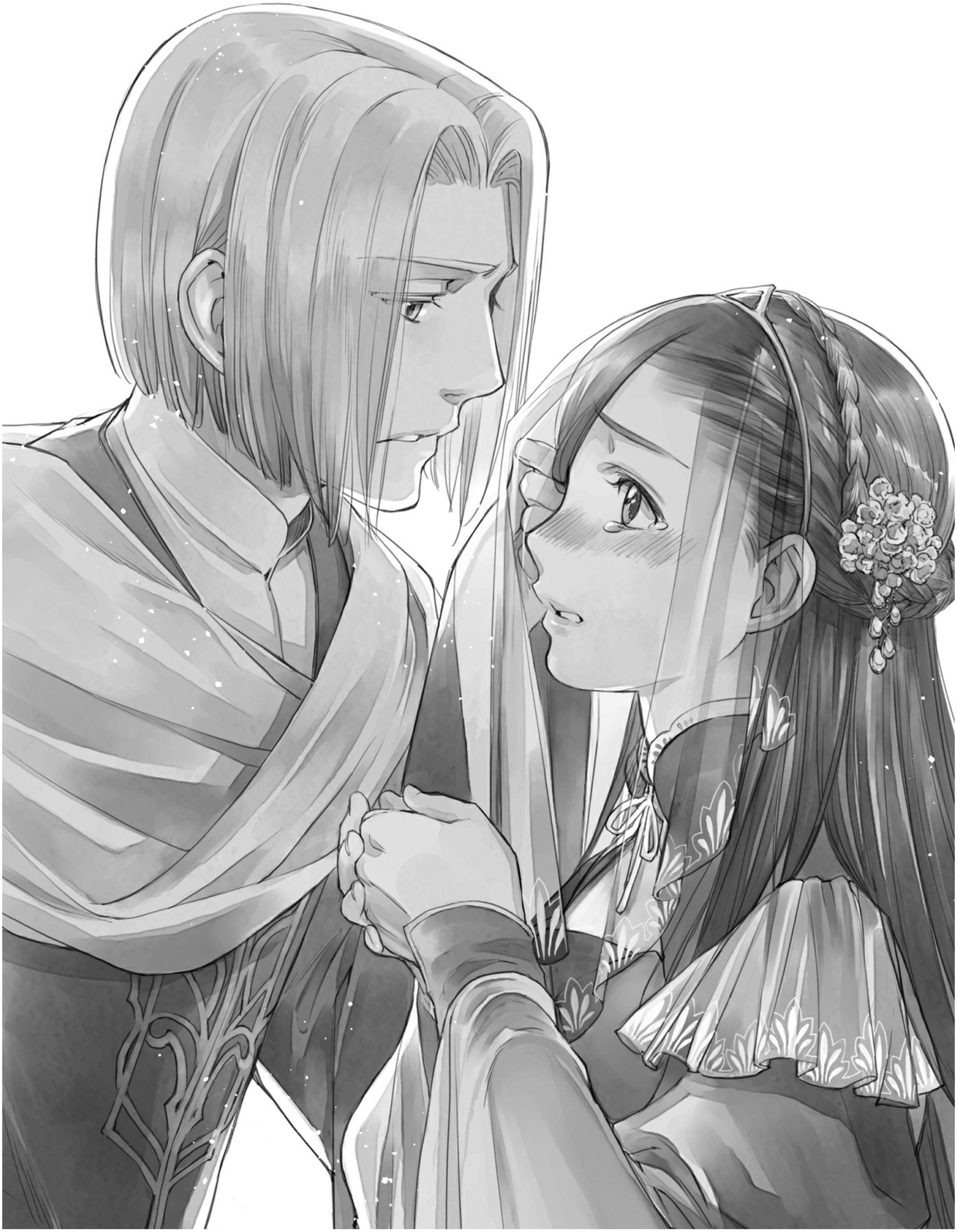
Dad’s promise echoed in my mind. Ferdinand never made vows he couldn’t keep, so this declaration was all the more unfair. The comfort of knowing he would always be by my side was almost overshadowed as my heart raced, my hands trembled, and my throat started to ache. My cheeks flushed, and tears welled up in my eyes.

"Ferdinand... I, um..."

I needed to communicate my feelings, but I couldn't find the words. My voice kept catching in my throat.

Ferdinand rose to his feet and wiped the tears from my eyes, using his sleeve to hide my crying face from our audience. "Do not weep here," he whispered. "I will not be able to console you."

"You knew what you were doing when you chose that message..."



Before we could say much else, cries of glee or horror—I couldn't tell which—arose among the nobles. I almost leapt out of my skin, so surprised that my tears dried up in an instant.

"What's going on?"

Despite my best attempts to look, I couldn't see past Ferdinand's sleeve. I gazed up at him for an explanation.

"It would seem I have erred..." he said with a frown.

"I-In what sense?"

"Do not ask."

Just tell me!

Ferdinand took a step back and sighed. Hartmut was watching us with a troubled expression, while Justus was desperately trying not to laugh. Lieseleta had turned beet red and was looking around the hall.

In the crowd, Elvira was the only one grinning from ear to ear and waving her lit schtappe through the air. Sylvester wore a more subtle smile, though I could tell that he was deeply moved. And then there was Bonifatius, who was shaking his fists while every knight in the vicinity fought to keep him under control.

"Continue, Hartmut," Ferdinand ordered. "Carry out your duty."

Hartmut took a second to regain his composure, then turned to those gathered. "May the newly engaged be blessed!"

The nobles raised their schtappes and made them shine together.

Proclamations as the Aub

“In accordance with the completed engagement ceremony, we have confirmed who will attend the Archduke Conference. Said people will receive registration brooches from the aub.”

Having a registration brooch was necessary to enter the Royal Academy and our dormitory. Ferdinand had made them with materials prepared by Hartmut and the others, but it was my duty as the aub to actually distribute them.

Ferdinand’s and my retainers were called up first. Those from Ehrenfest who had already received their brooches had since needed to return them. It might have seemed a little pointless, as we were going to give them straight back, but ceremony was important for these kinds of things.

“If not for your continued assistance,” I told the retainers, “I would not be attending the upcoming Archduke Conference as Alexandria’s new aub. In fact, neither Ferdinand nor I would even be here today.”

If not for Eckhart and Justus, Ferdinand might not have survived his time in Ahrensbach. If not for his Ahrensbach retainers, we wouldn’t have been able to restore order to the duchy in such a short time, nor would we have had the necessary documentation ready for the Archduke Conference. And above all else, if not for my retainers who had stood by me without question, we would never have been able to save Ferdinand.

I praised all of our retainers, who had worked tirelessly and endured manpower shortages ever since the Purge of Lanzenave. “Your busy days are far from over, but know that your hard work is greatly appreciated.”

Once they had their brooches, we called up the knights chosen by Strahl to attend the Archduke Conference, the scholars chosen by Ferdinand, and the attendants chosen by Fairseele and Sergius. They were all people Ferdinand considered trustworthy from his stay in Ahrensbach.

As a sidenote, Ferdinand wanted me to pick my Alexandrian retainers from among the aforementioned groups. He planned to lure some particularly bothersome opponents into traps, and the nobles before us now were his co-conspirators. His targets would apparently be summoned to the conference later to take up support roles.

He was only trying to keep me safe, so I did my best not to think about the poor souls soon to face his wrath.

It's nice that he has friends to scheme with.

Ferdinand was perfectly capable of working alone—as he'd proven time and time again—but it was good to hear he had accomplices for once. I silently cheered them on and wished them the best.

"Attendants," I said, "I suspect you will need to leave sooner than the rest of us to prepare the dormitory. You may choose your own servants. I see no reason to worry about those who have been supporting Ferdinand, but I expect this Archduke Conference to be especially arduous. So much has changed—even the duchy's name and color. Scholars, I cannot wait to see your talents as members of a greater duchy. Knights, I saw your strength and determination in our battle for the Sovereignty. May we all do our best to make it through."

As they received their brooches, the attendants, knights, and scholars seemed to realize just how little time we had before the Archduke Conference—each and every one of them wore a solemn expression. Old Ahrensbach had lost so many nobles through Lanzenave's massacre, the battle for the Sovereignty, and the severance of Old Werkestock; the burden on those who remained was going to be intense.

I continued to distribute brooches while Hartmut explained our plans for those orphaned during Lanzenave's massacre. For the most part, they would receive the same treatment as those orphaned during Ehrenfest's purge: I, the aub, would take over as their guardian. Orphans who were already baptized would spend time in the temple as apprentice blues, whereas those who weren't would need to enter the orphanage.

Among the unbaptized orphans, those with mana and their own magic tools would receive the opportunity to have a noble baptism ceremony. Orphans without tools had a chance to be given one depending on their motivation and potential, meaning they could also be returned to noble society.

“Lady Letizia lost those she depended upon in the massacre and will join the other orphans in the temple,” I explained. “Ferdinand and I will adopt her once we are Starbound, in accordance with the royal decree, but that will not be for another two years at least.”

A stir ran through the nobles. Some questioned the decision for Letizia to remain an archduke candidate, while others expressed their shock that someone of her status was being sent to the temple.

“Entering the temple while young and offering one’s prayers to the gods are essential to obtaining more divine protections,” I said. “Living in the temple and praying daily will grant her more power in the future.”

The importance of prayer was now common knowledge thanks to the research published during the Interduchy Tournament and the Dedication Rituals held at the Royal Academy. Ahrensbach’s nobles were behind the times, having been forbidden by Detlinde from participating in the rituals, and didn’t know that Yurgenschmidt’s bias against the temple was fading.

“I support Alexandria’s children visiting the temple and participating in religious ceremonies to obtain as many divine protections as they can,” I declared. “I also intend to open classrooms in the temple so that everyone has access to an education, no matter their status. One of my long-term goals is for everyone in my duchy to know how to read—even commoners!”

My announcement was met with dropped jaws and confused murmurs. Ferdinand cleared his throat to get my attention, then gave me a look of slight exasperation. I must have gone overboard. I cleared my throat in turn, attempting to regain my composure, and then continued my explanation in a more neutral tone.

“As everyone is aware, Ahrensbach maintained an advantage over other duchies through its trade with Lanzenave. Recent events have cost us that luxury. No longer can we boast of having the only open country gate in Yurgenschmidt.”

Indeed, Yurgenschmidt had no intention of continuing its business with Lanzenave now that the latter had developed so many ways of slaughtering our people.

“Now that Yurgenschmidt has a Zent with the Grutrissheit,” I continued, “the other country gates are bound to reopen. Ours and ours alone will remain shut—for the foreseeable future, at least—turning our previous advantage entirely on its head.”

Ahrensbach’s nobles had long mocked Ehrenfest for not having an open country gate. I trusted they would appreciate the irony of the situation.

“As you might have guessed, Alexandria will need a new industry to regain its former glory.”

The nobles gave me looks of understanding. I glanced at Ferdinand, who returned a small nod, indicating that I should continue.

“To that end, we have constructed a new laboratory within the castle and gathered research done by volunteer scholars on the spices and sugar grown in Yurgenschmidt. We intend to find an alternative to sugar and expect to make great progress moving forward. Once it can be grown, Alexandria will regain some superiority—but research seldom leads to immediate results.”

Setting up this brand-new industry would take ages. Alexandria needed something to keep it going in the meantime.

“We are in luck, then, that I developed several new industries back in Ehrenfest. I wish to continue them here, so I secured the aub’s permission to relocate my personnel. Alexandria will soon promote the printing and paper-making industries and spread a new wave of eateries.”

The nobles exchanged hushed words and turned to Sylvester; few duchies would agree to relinquish one industry, let alone several. He gave me an approving nod, completely unfazed.

“We are not stealing industries from Ehrenfest,” I said. “Rather, our duchies shall work together to grow them. The market needs a surplus of products for prices to decrease, and the demand for resources means that no one duchy can monopolize the creation of paper.”

Any duchy that did attempt to seize complete control of the paper-making industry would eventually face widespread deforestation. One could grow more trees with magic, but that would mean devoting however many nobles' mana to the creation of lumber.

"The printing industry is the same," I continued. "There are several printing workshops in Ehrenfest at this point, but they do not all print the same books. Ehrenfest's printing industry will not collapse from Alexandria setting up its own workshops."

That part of my speech was directed at Sylvester's and Florencia's retainers; I didn't want them to think of us as thieves.

"Together, we should prioritize making new books and printing workshops. By spreading the industries to other duchies, I can further enrich my library through the book deposit system."

"Rozemyne, the mask is slipping."

Oops. Guess I was a little too honest...

Ferdinand gave me a light glare. I merely smiled at him and continued to address the gathered nobles.

"As for the eateries, Ehrenfest's and Alexandria's distinct climates prevent us from serving exactly the same food. Each restaurant should adapt its menu to the region in which it is based. I, for one, hope to devise new recipes based on the joys brought by Alexandria's ocean."

Having made it clear that our duchies wouldn't be in direct competition, I started on my next point: "Commoners must serve as the backbone of our new industries. We will need to coordinate with them, and their education will prove crucial to Alexandria's growth."

I extolled the importance of raising literacy rates and described my overall plan for the temple's classrooms. Courses would remain cheap and available to all, but some nobles were reluctant to learn alongside commoners.

"You might not realize this yet, but we have so much to gain from working with those of other statuses. The new system I am proposing will not do away with home education; those who would rather depend on tutors are free to continue doing so."

My aim was not to put professors and tutors out of work. The temple's classrooms would cover no more than was taught during the first few years of the Royal Academy and wouldn't even touch upon magic. On top of that, the quality of education provided would only meet the standards of an average mednoble; it wouldn't even come close to being enough for an archnoble or archducal family member.

"There are times when laynobles' talents go undeveloped purely because they cannot secure good teachers," I said. "I saw it with my own eyes in Ehrenfest's winter playrooms. As I plan to devote resources to educating commoners, it stands to reason that I will do the same with nobles. As the importance of prayer continues to spread, I hope to gradually change everyone's opinions of the temple."

Not wanting to be overtaken by commoners would surely inspire the proud nobles to study harder than usual, and making them associate with commoners from a young age would do much to benefit Alexandria in the long term. Even just getting them into the temple to pray was important.

"Will orphans receive that education for free?" one noble asked. "If one can obtain the aub's support by living in the orphanage and then return to being a noble, will more parents not be compelled to abandon their children?"

Others also had concerns of that nature. Raising a noble was painfully expensive, and my explanation so far made it seem like we were giving the orphans preferential treatment.

"I shall serve as a backer for the orphans, but I will not cover the full cost of their living expenses. They will need to earn their own money and repay what they have spent when they start work."

"Come again...?"

I was rumored to be deeply compassionate, but that wasn't true at all. The orphans would need to get by on the funds given to blue priests and shrine maidens who provided their mana, payments for participating in Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, and the money they earned themselves. It would not be an easy life, by any means.

"I wish to spare the lives of young children who would otherwise have been punished for their parents’ sins, but I cannot promise them perfect lives as nobles. Should they not perform adequately at school, they will end up as blue or gray priests.”

An awkward, uncomfortable silence fell over the crowd. They must have thought my response was cold, or maybe they simply hadn’t expected it from a divine avatar, but having noble blood wasn’t a guarantee for becoming a noble.

“I shall do as I did in Ehrenfest and gather stories from Alexandria’s provinces,” I said, pressing on. “The orphans can all make money by transcribing books from the book room, hearing tales from the commoners with whom they study in the temple’s classrooms, and writing their own stories.”

The nobles of Old Ahrensbach shot Sylvester’s group a look that seemed to ask, “Was she really like this in Ehrenfest?” I’d made so much progress during my time there, and now I was waiting for the people of my new duchy to catch up.

“Such work is not exclusively for the orphans,” I noted. “I shall pay a reasonable price for any texts I am brought, be they ancient documents from a giebe’s estate, collections of stories passed down orally between commoners, original stories, compiled research, or transcriptions of texts from the Royal Academy. Anything is welcome.”

Bring them on!

Now, the nobles were completely stunned. Their eyes pleaded with the Ehrenfest group to stop me. Sylvester responded with a smile that basically said, “She’s your problem now.”

“Lord Ferdinand, should we not intervene?” Lieseleta asked, concerned by the nobles’ reactions. He glanced at me in place of a reply.

“Ferdinand, Lieseleta—every journey has to start somewhere. This information is necessary for everyone to understand my goals as the aub, and they will need to get used to my methods sooner or later.”

“That is entirely correct,” Hartmut agreed with a smile.

I saw Ferdinand grimace and pressed the attack. “Ferdinand, did you not tell me I could crush Ahrensbach or develop it as I please? Once my intentions are made clear, the nobles will realize they have no choice but to concede."

My greatest ambition was to supply my library with copies of every single text in Yurgenschmidt. If my status as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora would get me closer to completing that goal, then I wouldn't hesitate to use it. I'd even secured a promise from Eglantine that I could transcribe everything inside the palace library. I would do absolutely anything to become the ultimate librarian, and the nobles of Old Ahrensbach couldn't change that.

"As the Divine Avatar of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, I shall bring untold prosperity to the library city of Alexandria," I declared. "My library shall contain more books than any other in Yurgenschmidt, and as both an aub and a librarian, I shall strive to make it the most joyful place in the country. Let us all work together to make it the best it can be!"

Hartmut stepped forward. "Now then, everyone—let us pray for Alexandria's growth. We express our gratitude to the mighty King and Queen of the endless skies and to the mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm. Praise be to Flutrane the Goddess of Water, Leidenschaft the God of Fire, Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, Ewigeliebe the God of Life, and Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora!"

"Praise be to the gods!"

Most of the gathered nobles copied Hartmut and threw their hands up in prayer. I did as well.

As my love for developing the library became a blessing that rained down on the hall, I observed the giebes who hadn't been at the castle to succumb to Hartmut's brainwashing stare up in a daze. Ehrenfest's nobles had once reacted the same way. It wouldn't be long before they all got used to it.

Library and Laboratory

“You went too far, fool. You lost more than half of your audience.”

No sooner had the engagement ceremony concluded than Ferdinand launched into his newest lecture. We had moved to the waiting room for Ehrenfest guests, so he had no need to maintain a fake smile or resort to euphemisms; he could chastise me as directly as he wished.

Dumping my own facade, I turned away from him and pouted. “There’s no need to exaggerate; it was *almost* half. If you ask me, we should celebrate the fact that all those nobles knew how to pray in the first place. Hartmut’s and Clarissa’s teachings have made it such a long way.”

“Your praise honors me,” Hartmut replied with a proud but embarrassed smile. “It must have been a result of the entire city praying together during the ancient spell.”

I consulted my other retainers on instinct. “Um... Can someone tell me what he means by that?” I’d spent the duration of the spell inside the foundation’s hall, so I didn’t have a clue what the nobles had gotten up to in the meantime.

“Most of us were at the gates or stationed in the aub’s living quarters, so we only found out when it was already too late...” Cornelius replied at length, a distant look in his eyes. Hartmut had apparently ordered every noble and commoner in the city to pray.

“Ferdinand, why didn’t you stop him?” I asked.

“By doing what, exactly?” he replied with a glare. “I was with you in the foundation’s hall.”

I couldn’t argue with that logic, but I tried my best anyway. “I thought you might have foreseen his actions and done something to stop him in advance. It must have taken a lot of planning to make all the commoners pray.”

“If you understand that much, then you should also understand that there is nothing wrong with making nobles and commoners pray to you.”

Aha! So you were *in on it!*

I tried to strike, but Ferdinand stopped me before I could. “The fewer enemies you have, the better,” he said. “Your retainers will agree with me.”

A quick glance at them revealed that he was right.

“Now, should we not see our Ehrenfest visitors to the border gate?” he continued. “We are not the only ones with plenty to do before the Archduke Conference.”

Ehrenfest had played major roles in the battle against Lanzenave and the installment of a new Zent. Not to mention, I was Sylvester’s adopted daughter; he would need to actively support my becoming an aub during the conference. It made sense that they were so much busier than usual.

“Fathers, Mothers, Grandfather,” I said, “I thank you ever so much for coming to my engagement ceremony.”

“Don’t look so sad,” Sylvester replied. “We’re going to see you in Ehrenfest, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Ferdinand answered in my stead. “Expect her tomorrow afternoon.”

“She’s welcome to come through the Royal Academy’s dormitories. I wouldn’t normally extend that kindness to someone no longer associated with Ehrenfest, but what can I say? I’m a generous man.”

“My, what lackluster security. Are you not worried about information leaking? I will accept, though, as such an arrangement will aid me greatly.”

Ferdinand and Sylvester were lost in conversation, so I called over Damuel. He approached me from Bonifatius’s side.

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Please tell Ottilie and the others my schedule. And as we plan to move my retainers’ belongings before the Archduke Conference, I must ask that you inform their families as well.”

“Yes, my lady.”

I moved to continue but paused and took a deep breath. My next question would require some resolve.

“Damuel, do you intend to move to Alexandria with Philine when the time comes? I must select which Old Ahrensbach nobles to bring to the Archduke Conference as my retainers before my departure tomorrow. May I introduce you to them as a fellow retainer who will join them in two years’ time?”

He stood up straight and nodded without hesitation. “Yes, of course. I will wait for Philine to come of age and then move to Alexandria with her. Please introduce me as one of your retainers.”

“I am glad to see you have steeled your resolve.” I giggled and then added, “I shall ask Philine about her progress and what happened while I was away.”

Damuel averted his eyes. “Yes, ask her, not me.”

As soon as that was settled, we teleported to the border gate. We saw Sylvester’s group off as they teleported to Ehrenfest’s castle, then returned to our own.

“Now, if you would wait in your room until it is time to leave...” Ferdinand said to me.

“No thanks. At long last, I’m going to tour my library and your laboratory.”

I’d constructed an entire library with my entwickeln, only to be told that I wasn’t yet allowed to explore it. Anytime I’d proposed going there, someone had retorted with one of many true but unnecessary excuses, claiming that I would refuse to leave and that I would abandon all of my important duties to bask in its excellence.

“I patiently waited until our engagement ceremony was over,” I continued. “Now that I actually have some time on my hands, I wish to see them now more than ever.”

“Your library is still without books. The scholars have not had time to move any inside.”

“But your laboratory is reasonably well stocked, I assume. I will start there.”

Ferdinand grimaced, but I eagerly headed to his newly made laboratory. The large greenhouses contained rows upon rows of spice plants, giving me the impression of a botanical garden.

“There certainly are a lot of plants here, considering that the entwickeln was only a few days ago,” I mused aloud.

“I teleported the resources from various other laboratories here at once.”

The scholars of Old Ahrensbach, frustrated with the domineering Lanzenavians, had started researching ways to grow spices locally and end their duchy’s reliance on international trade. Some of the giebes ostracized by the old archducal family had also attempted to grow spices, which they had planned to sell to other duchies. Their plants and research were all gathered in this laboratory.

Ferdinand continued, “The scholars are in a great hurry to organize their research to prove during the upcoming conference that Alexandria is a worthwhile trade partner even now that its country gate is closed.”

We were still standing among all the plants I’d never seen before when a scholar arrived to deliver Ferdinand a report. As expected, our attempts to cultivate sugar were seeing limited results.

“The plants wilt without a greenhouse, so large-scale cultivation will not be easy...” Ferdinand explained. “That said, channeling mana into them has induced slight changes in each new generation.”

“That sounds fun. Can I add some of my mana too?” Supplying things was pretty much my specialty by this point.

Ferdinand shook his head. “Your mana remains a tad peculiar as a result of your body having housed a goddess. We should reserve it for other experiments, though they will take some time to prepare. Be patient for now.”

He and several scholars then discussed which of the crops I should supply and the best way to keep my mana from contaminating the other plants. In the meantime, Eckhart and Justus showed me and my retainers to their lord’s room in the laboratory.

“When he joins us here in Alexandria, Lasfam will oversee this place as one of his duties,” Justus informed me. “He should be more at ease here than in the castle’s chambers.”

I examined our surroundings. There weren’t many magic tools here yet, but I spied all of Ferdinand’s brewing equipment. It brought to mind his old hidden room.

Except his paperwork is in order for once, since his attendants now have access to it.

“Still, why was Ferdinand allowed to enjoy his laboratory when I wasn’t permitted to even visit my library?” I asked. Given how busy he must have been with Eglantine’s visit, the engagement ceremony, and preparing for the Archduke Conference, I was genuinely surprised to see it in such great form. “Is he even getting any sleep?”

Justus glanced in the direction of the greenhouses and gave a wry smile. “Compared to before he was poisoned, he is sleeping more and using fewer potions. Eating with you has also led to him having both lunch and dinner on a regular basis. It is a good trend, Lady Rozemyne. We should see even more improvement once the conference is behind us.”

“Lady Rozemyne,” hmm?

Justus chuckled, having noticed my strange expression. “Not used to me addressing you that way?”

“Well... you and Rihyarda always call me ‘milady.’”

“Mother would give me a pretty stern lecture if she caught me using that term with someone who’s formally engaged,” he noted, clearly amused.

I glared at him, but he wasn’t bothered in the slightest. I couldn’t complain about him resorting to a more common form of address—Rihyarda had already done the same with Ferdinand—but the emotional distance it created was a little upsetting.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “Eckhart, Angelica, what’s happening with your engagement? Mother wanted an answer before the Archduke Conference, did she not?”

Now that Eckhart and Angelica were both in Alexandria, they could revive the engagement they had previously needed to cancel. Bonifatius supported the idea more than anyone.

“The two of you seem perfect for each other in more ways than one,” I continued. “As long as Angelica feels the same way.”

Eckhart nodded, then turned to Angelica. “How do you want to proceed? I haven’t forgiven Ahrensbach’s nobles for what they did to Lord Ferdinand. Our marriage would give me a convenient excuse to block any future proposals.”

“I, too, would consider it convenient. A weak knight proposed to me just recently, and I’m not sure how to turn him down.”

Wait. Hold on. You’ve settled the matter already?!

The rebirth of their engagement had come about in such a bland and unromantic way that I could already imagine Elvira’s disappointment. Lieseleta smiled about how appropriate this was for her sister, but marrying Eckhart just to avoid rejecting someone seemed crazy even by Angelica’s standards.

“Oh my. Are you not the same, Lady Rozemyne?” Lieseleta asked. “My sister might not be in love, but she is marrying Lord Eckhart out of convenience and to avoid an engagement with someone who does not meet her standards. Are you not getting married for the same reasons?”

“That is... I guess?”

She had a point, but being lumped together with Angelica didn’t sit right with me. I really did want to be part of a family with Ferdinand, and our engagement hadn’t been decided so carelessly.

I returned to Ferdinand, my lips pursed, and announced that I was going to visit my library. Now that I’d seen his room, there was little else I wanted to do here; there wasn’t much enjoyment to be had in a laboratory that was mostly empty save for a few greenhouses.

Though my library is going to be even emptier.

Ferdinand caught up to me while I was crossing the sky bridge connecting the lab to my library. Justus unlocked the door at the other end.

“Aah!”

Its shelves were bare, but the library of my dreams stretched out before me.

So great was its resemblance to the British Museum Reading Room that, for a moment, I felt as though I'd stepped into a photograph. I gave an accidental blessing in my excitement, but no one even reacted; they had probably thought this might happen.

"This place is something else..." I said. "See the domed roof and its many windows? They allow more than enough light into the library while ensuring it never reaches the shelves along the walls, reducing the risk of discoloration." Light-producing magic tools were always an option, but Alexandria didn't have enough mana in its current state to keep them operational on a daily basis.

"The reading desks under the dome all receive an equal amount of light," I continued. "Guests won't need to worry about the time of day or where they're seated—one of the main problems with the Royal Academy's carrels. Furthermore, there is a magic tool on the ceiling that will use light to announce when it is closing time."

I pointed to the radial reading desks. "I intend to have Opac and Kensaku stationed there, while—"

"Pause," Ferdinand said reproachfully. "I do not recognize those words."

I cocked my head at him. "They're magic tools dedicated to helping our guests find whatever books they need. The library is enormous, and the placement of the shelves means that some people might not be able to reach them on their own. The more magic tools, the better, no?"

"You're still set on using those names...?" Cornelius asked, slumping his shoulders. I thought they were simple and easy to remember, but Ferdinand disagreed; he called them "ugly and foreign-sounding" and took particular issue with Kensaku.

"In any case, there were few books in Ahrensbach's castle," he said. "A single magic tool should do for now."

"I also intend to use security shumils to drive away those who cause trouble or attempt to steal from the library. How many would you advise I make?"

Clarissa raised a timid hand. "I cannot answer your question, but might I suggest you make them a tad less... *lethal* than the ones you stationed in

Ehrenfest?”

“Certainly. I shall entrust such changes to you, Hartmut, or Raimund.”

“You may count on me,” said not just Clarissa but Raimund as well. He would help make whatever improvements were necessary for the library to run optimally.

“Still, should you not have made the library smaller?” Raimund pondered, looking around the massive reading room. “There aren’t enough books in the entire country to fill all these shelves.” Entwickelns used up a tremendous amount of mana, so all this empty space must have seemed wasteful.

“The mighty Ironquill once stated that man builds no structure which outlives a book. This library might look spacious now, but the day will come when its shelves are all packed. I really am looking forward to it.”

By that time, the literacy rate among commoners would surely have improved. I could establish a new library exclusively for them and set up more libraries on the outskirts of the Noble’s Quarter. Highbeasts made travel a nonissue, and teleportation circles could transport goods with ease, so it wouldn’t even be hard to move books between them.

As we continued our discussion, we cut through the reading room and went to the library’s main entrance, which was below the sky bridge to the laboratory. We made our way to the wing where the librarians’ rooms were located and stopped outside a door at the top of the stairs.

“This room will be yours, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said.

I was given a tour of the empty room, which was as uneventful as one might imagine. It just needed to be furnished; then I could actually live here in the library.

“I will need a desk and chair for when I read and a sofa to lounge on,” I said.

“First you need a bed for when you grow too excited or collapse from overwork,” Ferdinand replied, eliciting nods from my retainers. They were being as overprotective as always.

“I think a sofa would serve that same purpose...”

Lieseleta asked me what else I might need when I moved in.

“I will spend most nights in the castle, so a desk and chair really are all that I need.”

“Still, ensure that everything is ready from the start,” Ferdinand said. “It might seem tedious, but I would rather not risk another incident. Have you forgotten when you first entered the temple and neglected to prepare a bed, only to collapse and cause a mass disturbance?” It was an ancient example, but it spurred my retainers to start discussing the fastest way to get my room in order.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand continued, “make a hidden room here as well.”

“Is the room not enough on its own?”

“You need one to keep things precious to you in the library.”

I did as instructed, and Ferdinand pressed a red feystone against the wall. I placed my hand over his and channeled my mana through him, registering both of us to the newly made hidden room.

“Wait!” Cornelius cried, having suddenly realized what was about to happen. “You can’t go in there together just yet!” His protest fell on deaf ears, however, as Ferdinand pulled me into the hidden room without another word.

“Cornelius is going to scold me... again,” I said.

“Rest assured—a few threats will stay his tongue,” Ferdinand replied.

“No! No threats! You’re making me feel worse!”

Ferdinand responded with a dismissive exhale, then formed his Book of Mestionora and started placing a person-teleporting magic circle. I could think of only one reason he would put such a thing in my hidden room.

“Ferdinand, is that...?”

“It connects to your room in the lower city. Consider it a gateway to your family.”

I gazed down at the completed magic circle, then knelt and supplied it with mana until it shone. It had one set destination, much like the circles used to connect the country’s castles to their respective dormitories.

“So my family’s home is on the other end of this circle?” I asked.

“Yes. I doubt you will see them anytime soon—they must first move here from Ehrenfest, and there are schedules to consider—but this is how you will return to them. Expect to wait another season, at least—until the Archduke Conference has passed and your burdens as the aub have started to ease.”

Warmth spread through my chest. By using his Book of Mestionora to place a teleportation circle here in this hidden room, Ferdinand was ensuring that my connection to my family would never crumble, even if my time as the aub came to an end or circumstances required me to leave the castle. He had even come up with a schedule for my visits. I was so glad to have him by my side.

I moved my hand away from the circle, stood, and then pulled Ferdinand into an embrace. “When the time comes, let’s go together. I want you there with me when I visit my family.”

“No, but...” Ferdinand tried to escape me and replied in a panicked voice, “I would only get in the way.”

I glared at him and held on even more tightly. “You would *not*.”

“Let go of me...” he grumbled, but I refused. He always got skittish when it came to family matters.

“Nuh-uh. Not until you agree to come with me.”

Ferdinand averted his eyes. “Your family would not feel comfortable with a noble in the room. I would put them on edge. And you find it harder to be open with them when I am around, do you not?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond at first. He was right that commoners wouldn’t see him the same way I did. My family would be surprised and probably even a little anxious, but I wasn’t going to leave him behind. We were engaged.

“Only my noble family attended our engagement ceremony. My commoner family doesn’t even know I’m engaged. I want to introduce you to them. I want to point to you and tell them you’re the man I plan to marry.” I gazed up at him, and he met my eye. “Or... do you not want me to?”

There was a long silence before he said, “I would not mind.” He sounded defeated, but I could see the smile playing on his lips.

Back to Ehrenfest

“Start by checking these,” Ferdinand said. We had just concluded our library tour and returned to my chambers in the aub’s living quarters when he handed me a list of tasks to complete in Ehrenfest. From what I could see, we had discussed roughly half of them already.

“Is it really okay for me to go back?” I asked.

“Yes, I guarantee it. As you might recall, the initial plan was for you and your retainers to stay here only for a few days until the problems brought about by the battle for the Sovereignty were resolved.”

Indeed, we hadn’t packed anywhere near enough for a permanent move. My retainers and I would need more time to get ourselves ready before we could properly live in Alexandria.

Ferdinand continued, “You were all preparing to move to the Sovereignty before your destination suddenly changed. I suspect many of your retainers will need to discuss the new arrangement with their houses and parents. After all... moving to the Sovereignty as the retainer of a princess is nothing like moving to the duchy that just invaded one’s home to serve its new aub.”

I’d thought it wouldn’t really matter that our destination had changed. Becoming an aub capable of creating my own library sounded so much better than having to accept a worse life as a princess, but not everyone would appreciate the new circumstances.

“Your hidden rooms in Ehrenfest’s castle and temple must be closed,” Ferdinand explained, “and the library I gave you needs to be cleared out and returned.”

“Guh... I’m losing my library? Can’t we make it, like, the Ehrenfest branch of my library here in Alexandria?”

“Do not be foolish,” he snapped. “The estate belongs to the aub and is meant to be given to members of the archducal family when they come of age. Do you really intend to claim ownership of another duchy's property? How greedy and arrogant can one woman be?" It was a pretty stern lecture for what I'd meant to be a passing thought.

"You're the one who put the idea in my head. You gave me the estate before you moved, even though I was too young to stay there and already had a room in the castle. I was going to let Charlotte or Melchior have it and—"

"My circumstances were unique; I understood that using the books in my library as bait would guarantee Lasfam's safety and the security of my belongings. Not to mention, you were engaged to Wilfried; the plan was for you to stay in Ehrenfest."

Back then, we had just experienced the theft of our bible, and the purge of the former Veronica faction had loomed on the horizon. Ferdinand had deemed it safest to give me the estate, since Georgine could easily sneak her pawns into the castle, and Sylvester had agreed.

"You have no need to leave any of your belongings in Ehrenfest or to leave someone to oversee the estate in your absence. In the first place, who would you station there? Lasfam needed somewhere to escape Veronica's wrath, but most archducal retainers would view being sent to work away from the castle as being ostracized by their lord or lady."

"Even though living in a library is the greatest blessing one could imagine...?"

"Fool. Do not assume your strange opinions are the norm. It is still in your best interests to empty and seal the estate before giving it away. Its books will cease to be yours otherwise."

I wouldn't have minded lending those books, but I didn't want to lose ownership of them. Call me arrogant or greedy—I was determined to own as many books as I could get my hands on.

"It saddens me to lose a library... but I suppose there is no other choice."

Ferdinand extended a hand to me. I stared at it for a moment, then looked up at him quizzically and asked what he wanted.

"Hand me the engagement feystone I gave you," he replied. "I will turn it into a necklace before we leave tomorrow."

"I thought you gave me just the feystone so I could fashion it into anything." Engaged women wore theirs as necklaces, but I'd received mine as an ordinary stone. I called Lieseleta over and asked her to return it to him, but I couldn't help thinking he should have given it to me as a necklace in the first place.

"It is crucial during an engagement ceremony for both parties to confirm the words written within their feystones," Ferdinand explained. "They can be obscured when the stones are turned into accessories, which is why that part of the process comes later. Because engagement feystones exist as a way of getting used to feeling the other person's mana against one's skin, the chain and such are also made out of mana. Did you not know that?"

"No, this is my first time hearing about it. I was engaged to Wilfried, but we never exchanged feystones, so..."

"You were too young for a proper engagement. You would only have exchanged feystones when you both developed mana-sensing."

But we hadn't made it that far, and now I was engaged to Ferdinand. Wouldn't my lack of education on these matters cause problems? I voiced my concerns, but he just furrowed his brow at me.

"It might, but we can address the gaps in your education later. Such matters are nowhere near as important as the Archduke Conference and your inauguration. For now, what kind of necklace would you like? If you have something intricate in mind, then you are welcome to make your own—though that might be too taxing for you as you are now. I am open to requests if you want to decide the shape and the like."

"No, I'm not picky, but does it really need to be done by tomorrow?" For obvious reasons, I wanted to delay wearing a feystone for as long as I could. I was already dyed with Ferdinand's mana, and Ehrenfest knew about our engagement, so why were we rushing to make the necklace?

"An engaged woman must wear one when moving around the castle," Ferdinand replied, making it clear that I didn't have a choice in the matter. "Given its properties as a magic tool, it will need to touch your skin to some degree, but relax—I will design it so that you are barely able to see the feystone."

I wanted to protest, but there was no point; his logic would counter any argument I tried to make. Creating my own necklace was absolutely out of the question, so I conceded to him making it for me.

“I shall entrust the rest to you, then, Ferdinand. But do not work too hard during this already hectic period.”

To tell the truth, I didn’t care what form my engagement feystone took, but Ferdinand arrived at the teleportation hall with it fashioned into a necklace. As my belongings and retainers were gradually teleported to Ehrenfest, he opened the box containing the necklace so that I could see it with my own eyes.

“It is done, Rozemyne,” he said.

The necklace was designed in such a way that intricately decorated metal covered most of the large rainbow feystone. Ferdinand had struck the perfect balance, making sure it was easily recognizable as an engagement feystone while also keeping the stone out of my line of sight. Its splendid, ornate metalwork spoke to hands far more talented than my own, fully confirming that I was right to leave the task to him.

“Wow!” I cried out in awe. “To think you could make something so detailed in just one day...”

Ferdinand plucked the necklace from its box. I could tell that he wanted to put it on me, so I turned my back to him and moved my hair out of the way. The slight chill of the metal chain and the sensation of the feystone against my skin made me jump at first, but I stopped noticing them when they matched my body heat. It must have been because the mana leaking from them was the same as that already within me.

I touched the necklace with my fingertips. Its metal casing was more prominent than the feystone, so it didn’t unnerve me as much as I’d expected.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” Ferdinand asked, eyeing our surroundings carefully. I also looked around to make sure everyone within earshot was from Ehrenfest, then shook my head.

“No, I’m fine. Maybe because it’s your mana leaking out, it doesn’t bother me as much as other feystones.”

“I see,” Ferdinand said, showing his satisfaction with a nod.

We were joined today by my new retainers from Old Ahrensbach, whom I’d chosen from Ferdinand’s list of acceptable candidates. They didn’t yet know about my feystone phobia—we had elected not to tell them until after the Archduke Conference—so I needed to watch what I said even in my room. It made me tense enough that I was even more grateful to be returning to Ehrenfest.

“Lady Rozemyne, all of your other retainers have teleported,” announced Cornelius, who had overseen their transportation. “Let us go as well.”

I nodded and stood.

“Finish brewing the dyes and making the cape and crest as soon as possible,” Ferdinand said. “Contact me when you are done.”

“Right,” I replied with a smile. “I’ll be back before you know it, but let me know if anything happens, okay?” Returning to Alexandria would be easy thanks to the dormitories’ teleporters.

Ferdinand grimaced and shook his head. “We might now have an easier way to move between the duchies, but you must not return to Alexandria before your inauguration ceremony is complete.”

“Why not? I’m the aub, aren’t I?” I’d intended to come back as soon as I completed all the tasks on my to-do list, so I couldn’t understand why he wanted me to stay in Ehrenfest.

“You are, which is precisely why I need you out of the picture. I plan to destroy what remains of Ahrensbach’s foul traditions before the Archduke Conference. Your compulsion to lend an ear to anyone and everyone who calls for help will only get in my way.”

Ferdinand went on to remind me of my sympathizing with Gervasio in the Garden of Beginnings. It certainly would be problematic for the duchy’s highest authority to intervene based on her emotions, especially when she didn’t understand the actual circumstances.

"Fair enough, then," I said. "I won't return to Alexandria until the Archduke Conference is behind us. Still, Ahrensbach's traditions can't all be foul. Take care not to ruin the good ones."

"Yes, their administration was superior to Ehrenfest's in more ways than one. I came to understand that all too well."

Ferdinand wouldn't make any headway with me interjecting all the time, and the blame for any issues I caused would rest entirely with me. He was insistent on delaying my return so he could tie up all the loose ends with Old Ahrensbach.

By which I mean he's laying all the necessary traps. I just hope he doesn't go overboard.

"I understand your concern, but you cannot be involved," Ferdinand continued. "Your time would be much better spent studying the duchy's industries and geography. The relevant resources are somewhere among the luggage being transported today."

As it stood, my retainers and I had a very limited understanding of our new home; we were unaware of even basic facts about its land and industries that Old Ahrensbach nobles knew as a matter of course. I was inheriting Letizia's study materials so I could remedy this before the Archduke Conference.

That means new textbooks. Yippee!

"Lieseleta," Ferdinand said, "give Rozemyne her new study materials only when she has delivered the cape and crest to the Zent. Do *not* let her have them any sooner."

"How rude..." I remarked. "Even I understand that the cape and crest come first."

"Consider it an extra precaution. I will meet you at the tea party room on the day of the inauguration ceremony. I beg of you, do not cause any trouble in the meantime."

Ferdinand reached out and stroked my cheek. In the past, he would almost certainly have taken this opportunity to pinch me, but my sudden growth spurt meant there was no longer any baby fat in my cheeks. It was another victory for my new appearance.

“Well, I must depart,” I said. “Be sure to eat and sleep well, Ferdinand.”

I gave him one last chastising look, reminding him I wasn’t the only one with bad habits, and then stepped onto the teleporter with Lieseleta and Cornelius. We soon arrived at the Royal Academy, where we found my retainers waiting in a side room.

“Please inform Ehrenfest of our—”

“I sent an ordonnanz earlier,” Hartmut said, cutting Lieseleta short. “Gretia and the others await us in the tea party room.”

I nodded and made my way there.

We hadn’t been at the tea party room long when more of my Ehrenfest retainers arrived: Damuel, Philine, Ottilie, Bertilde, and Judithe. I could sense their unease about there being Old Ahrensbach nobles with me.

“Everyone here is a member of my retinue,” I said. “You will need to work closely together as my inauguration ceremony draws near, so learn the faces and names of anyone you do not recognize.”

From there, I gave Damuel and Philine their registration brooches.

“Damuel and Philine shall continue to serve me, though they will remain in Ehrenfest for the time being. They both have permission to use Alexandria’s dormitory and castle for as long as travel through the Royal Academy is an option. Philine, in particular, will sometimes act as my retainer when the Academy resumes. Be sure to associate with her.”

I watched my retainers exchange polite introductions. They would spend the rest of the gathering speaking about the move to Alexandria and the future delegation of their work.

“I doubt I am needed in a discussion among retainers, so I will return to Ehrenfest ahead of you. Bertilde, Judithe, Ottilie—let us go.”

We took our leave, then entered Ehrenfest’s dormitory through its tea party room and proceeded to its teleportation hall. Judithe glanced over her shoulder and sighed.

"I really do envy Damuel and Philine... I want to join you all in Alexandria, but my father won't let me." He had agreed to at least consider her move to the Sovereignty based on her engagement prospects but was strictly against her moving to my new duchy.

"As your father, his response was only natural," Ottilie explained with a slight smile. "It isn't easy to get married or raise children in an environment without your parents or some family of your own. If something happens to you under those circumstances, they won't be able to assist you. It shouldn't surprise you that your father would rather you stay in Ehrenfest."

It was standard practice in noble society to debut children only when they were baptized; otherwise, their very existence was kept secret from everyone but their parents' closest friends. One also had to consider that most noblewomen lived sheltered lives and seldom had chances to go outside. Ottilie told us from her perspective as a parent that any father would worry about sending his daughter somewhere he couldn't vet her husband or make sure she would get along well with his family.

"Few parents would agree to send their unmarried daughter to a duchy as unstable as Alexandria," she concluded.

"Ottilie, are you worried about Hartmut?"

"Yes, but not for the reasons you suspect. As everyone knows by this point, he is something of a Lady Rozemyne fanatic, so I worry he might be a bother..."

We all understood exactly what she meant. Though Hartmut was a talented scholar, it was easy to remember all the times he'd gone on a rampage or randomly begun raving about my virtues.

Ottilie continued, "He is already engaged to Clarissa of Dunkelfelger and should do just fine in an environment where he can focus on his work. Your father, Judithe, has much greater cause for concern. Men and women have very different experiences."

There might not have been as much backlash if she had family in Alexandria to rely upon, but she wasn't quite so fortunate. If she continued to serve me, she would need to associate with the nobles of a duchy that had just recently invaded us. My retainers' engagements would serve a crucial role in strengthening our duchy’s internal relations going forward, but from another perspective, one could consider it more akin to a hostage situation.

“I understand your desire to serve Lady Rozemyne, but you can always join me in serving my elder sister instead,” Bertilde noted, taking Judithe by the hands. She must have wanted more of her coworkers to stay in Ehrenfest. “Remaining here will put your family at ease, and you can expect a warm welcome from Brunhilde and me. My sister and Lady Charlotte both stressed the importance of us protecting what Lady Rozemyne must leave behind. Do you not consider that your duty as her retainer?”

Ottilie turned to me, her warm smile hardening into a more stern expression. “The complexity of raising a child can only be learned through experience, so we cannot expect too much of one so young and still unmarried. Nonetheless, Lady Rozemyne, I must ask you to pay especially close attention to the futures of your female retainers leaving Ehrenfest to serve you.”

“I will.”

We teleported to Ehrenfest, where Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior awaited us.

“Welcome back, Sister,” Charlotte said. “Do forgive Father and the others for their absence—there is much they must do in preparation for the Archduke Conference. In less hectic times, the archducal couple would personally attend the arrival of a future aub.”

“There is no need to apologize for them,” I replied. “They took time out of their busy schedules to attend my engagement ceremony. I should also note that, as my formal inauguration ceremony has yet to take place, I am still their adoptive daughter first and foremost. You may be at ease.”

I wasn’t about to ask the archducal couple to stop what they were doing to welcome me when they’d traveled all the way to Alexandria for my engagement ceremony. To be honest, I was surprised even these three had found the time to come here.

We had started toward the northern building when Wilfried stared down at my necklace. “Feels strange to see you wearing an engagement feystone.” His remark prompted the others to look as well.

“I don’t quite follow,” I said, trying to hide the feystone with my hand. Being the center of attention was making me a little uncomfortable.

“Don’t you feel weird about being engaged to *Ferdinand*, of all people? Not that I think it’s a bad thing—you need someone to keep your rampages under control.”

“Oh, but my rampages are harmless compared to his, I assure you.” Wilfried could only make such remarks because he hadn’t been there for the transference ceremony or our meeting with the royal family. Ferdinand had threatened the royals, attacked Erwaermen, and overall just acted as he pleased.

“Maybe, but he acts deliberately. You just act on impulse. He’s better for you than Prince Sigiswald, in any—”

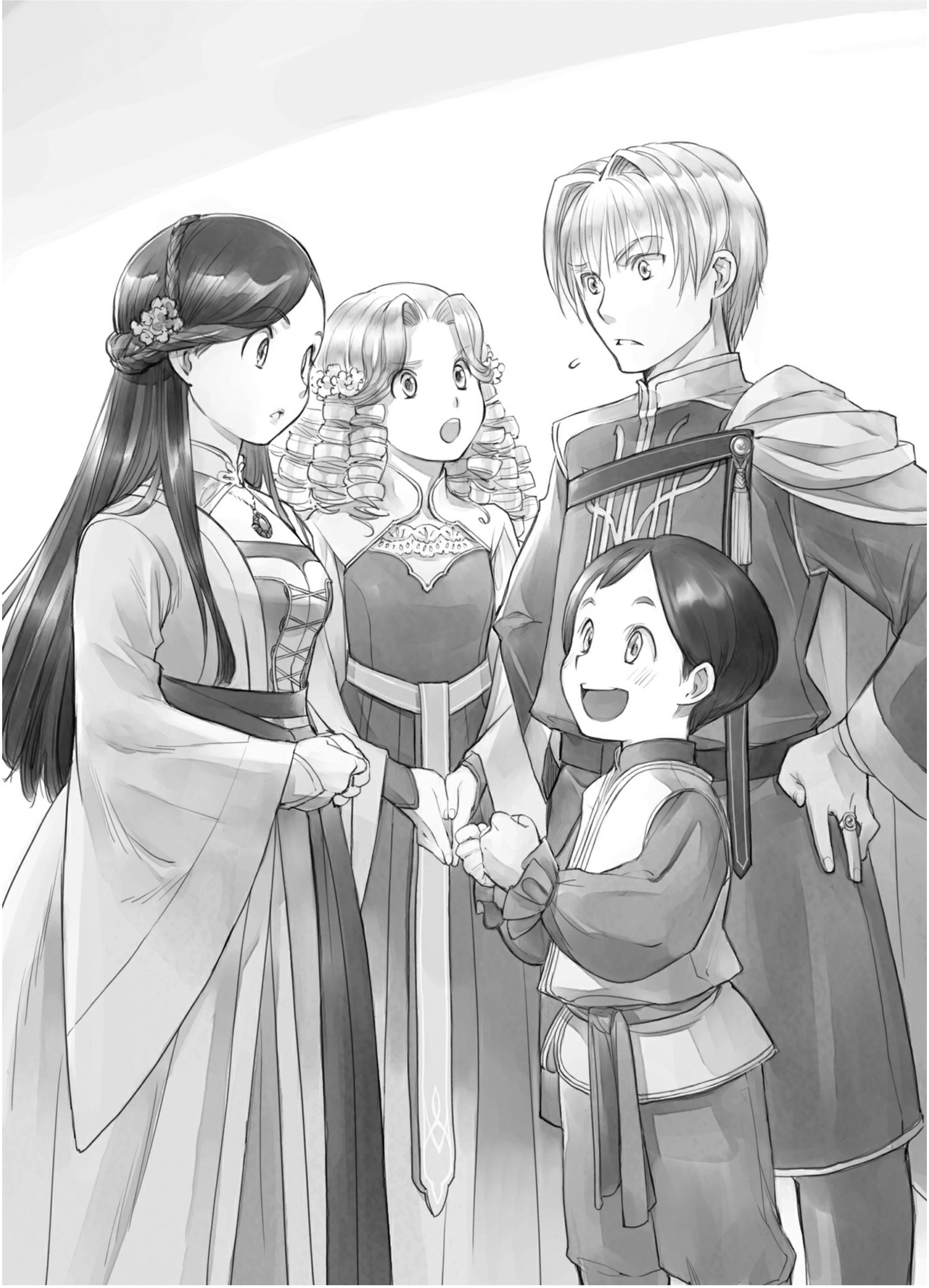
“Brother, he is *Lord* Sigiswald now,” Charlotte interjected. “The transference ceremony made it official. Using his old title is disrespectful to Zent Eglantine.”

She was right. Trauerqual wasn’t the Zent anymore, which meant Sigiswald, Anastasius, and Hildebrand were princes no longer. They were to be styled as lords from now on.

“It was a harmless little mistake,” Wilfried said.

“Even little mistakes can have serious consequences.”

Paying their argument no mind, Melchior looked up at me. “Rozemyne, Father and Mother told me you personally asked for me to be allowed to attend the transference ceremony. It was a wonderful event. I was so glad to be there. Your divine power could be felt throughout the entire auditorium.”



Melchior launched into an excited retelling of the ceremony. The special circumstances had meant it was his very first trip to the Royal Academy. He had seen dedication whirls produce pillars of light, statues move atop the shrine, and the avatar of a goddess bestow a Grutrissheit upon the new Zent.

Wait, is that really how he saw it? I just remember the headache of my charms shining the entire time, being suddenly teleported to the Garden of Beginnings, and then having the gods assail me with blessings...

Melchior's memory of the ceremony differed quite dramatically from mine, but that was okay. For him to have considered it a divine spectacle, we must have done exactly what we set out to achieve.

"How fares the temple?" I asked. "I know Philine is back from Spring Prayer. Are the others done too?"

"Two priests have yet to return, but things are proceeding smoothly. I got back from praying at one of the farming towns just yesterday."

The Defense of Ehrenfest had delayed Spring Prayer to some degree, but everything was back on schedule. Priests had even made trips to Gerlach, Illgner, and the other provinces involved in the fighting.

"The mana stolen by Old Werkestock's giebes was returned without incident, and this year's harvest seems likely to succeed," Melchior concluded. It was predicted to be worse than last year but, to my relief, not bad enough to put the commoners' lives at risk.

Charlotte waited for a lull in our conversation before she called out to me. "Um, Sister... You haven't yet spoken to the Gutenbergs about the abrupt change of plans, have you? They were quite shocked when, at the aub's command, Brunhilde requested their opinions on the schematics. Should you not take this time to consult with them?"

Ferdinand had just told me I was the only one taking our change of destination from the Sovereignty to Alexandria lightly. Benno's face arose in my mind, twisted with righteous fury.

Eep! He's going to unleash his thunder for sure!

“I asked the aub to speak with them in my stead,” I replied.

My decision to become an aub had come right before we had needed to leave Ehrenfest, and the chaos in the Sovereignty and my discussions with the royals had taken up every minute of my time. I simply hadn’t had a chance to speak with Benno or the others, though I supposed that was no excuse; I’d still uprooted their plans out of nowhere.

“Melchior, I will send word once all the necessary arrangements for the Zent have been made,” I said. “Could you take that as your cue to gather the Gutenbergs in the temple? I will give them a report then and there.”

“I see nothing wrong with that, but might I propose sorting out the priests at the same time? Philine mentioned that you intend to take your temple attendants with you to the new duchy. Kazmiar said we need to arrange their sale and a means of transporting them.”

“Very well,” I replied with a nod. Making those preparations was on my to-do list from Ferdinand, but I also considered it my duty as their lady. “I shall take care of the matter before meeting the merchants. Could you have the High Priest arrange the necessary documents?”

Melchior stuck out his chest and said, “Absolutely.”

We had just reached the corridor to the northern building when Charlotte turned to me. “Sister, I am told your retainers are going to and from the dormitory as they each move their belongings to Alexandria. Is your own schedule in order?”

“Tomorrow, I plan to visit my library. I need to brew the dye for Alexandria’s capes.”

“Oh, right. The base dye,” Wilfried said, thinking back to the archduke candidate course. “First-generation aubs sure have it rough.”

“‘Base dye’?” Melchior asked. Neither he nor Charlotte knew about it yet, so they both looked at us quizzically.

“Yes, the dye used to determine a duchy’s color. Ehrenfest has one too. It’s brewed with magic so it can completely change the color of any cape or tapestry or what have you, no matter its material. Having one is crucial when you're founding a new duchy." If not for base dye, nobles joining from other duchies would need to order new capes and go to the trouble of getting them reembroidered.

"Can the nobles not give their capes to commoner dyers?"

"Preparing and dyeing cloth takes time—the commoners' work would never end if they had to dye every single cape by themselves. They do, however, dye the newly made capes given to students joining the Royal Academy. The aub prepares the base color, which the dyers then emulate."

"In that case, why do people marrying into another duchy buy entirely new capes?" Charlotte asked. "Could they not use that dye and spare themselves from having to redo their embroidery?"

"Base dyes use ingredients local to their respective duchies," Wilfried explained. "They're also tough to brew—too tough for most laynobles and mednobles. I guess they consider it quicker to just embroider a new cape."

"Not to mention," I added, "some duchies keep the recipe a secret and control all sales of their capes to prevent misuse."

"I was told the Zent would present you with your cape, but do you have to prepare it?"

"Indeed. I was instructed to buy an Ehrenfest cape, dye it, and send it to the Zent. It will then be presented to me during the inauguration ceremony and used to demonstrate Alexandria's color. As my head scholar, Hartmut is striving to complete the crest and all the relevant paperwork."

I'd insisted that *I* could draw the crest, secretly hoping to sneak Lessy in there among the shumils, but Ferdinand must have seen right through me; he'd turned me down and strictly forbidden anyone from letting me get involved.

"Preparing for the Archduke Conference sounds like such a great ordeal," Melchior said. "May it all go smoothly for you, Sister."

"Let me know if you need any help," Wilfried added. "I'll do whatever I can."

The pair waved me farewell and then headed to their rooms. Charlotte and I continued upstairs.

“Sister—though your hands must be full enough already, try to visit Elvira when you can. Um... Mother said you need to speak with Aurelia, and this is Elvira’s last chance to spend time with you as family, so...”

I nodded. The conversation to come wouldn’t be pleasant for Aurelia, but there was no avoiding it. I promised that I would contact Elvira and then entered my room.

“Welcome,” Rihyarda greeted me as soon as I crossed the threshold. Sylvester had ordered her to serve as my retainer for as long as I was at the castle. “You have few attendants at hand now that Lieseleta and Gretia are busy moving their belongings. Lady Brunhilde wished to serve you until the last possible moment, but she has her own duties as the adult fiancée of an aub.”

Ehrenfest had exceptionally few adult archducal family members. And as only adults could participate in the Archduke Conference, Brunhilde had much to do.

Her attending to me at the dormitory truly was a special exception.

“As for your schedule tomorrow, milady... *Ahem.* Pardon me. Now that you are engaged, I should address you more properly.”

“I was a little upset when Justus stopped calling me ‘milady.’ It won’t be long before I stop hearing it entirely. Could you at least keep using it until the Archduke Conference, when I’ll officially become Aub Alexandria?”

Rihyarda thought for a moment, then gave a reluctant sigh and smiled in defeat. “How demanding of you. Very well, milady... but only in this room.”

Her compromise warmed my heart. For the first time in ages, it felt like I was home. As eager as I was to fill my new library in Alexandria with books, I also wanted to make the most of these final moments. I found myself unable to sit still and snatched up my to-do list.

“Rihyarda, there is much I must do here in Ehrenfest.”

“Indeed. I was informed of your duties by letter and thought I would go over them with you today. You arrived later than expected, however, and there is not much time before dinner. As you have so few guards at the moment, I would advise you to wait here and not leave your room until they arrive.”

Rihyarda’s tone was as sharp as ever, but I considered it relaxing for some reason.

“Can you prepare me some of your tea?” I asked. “It should do wonders to help me calm down.”

“Ohoho... Coming right up, milady.”

Brewing the Base Color

"Ottilie, could you inform Mother that I am back in Ehrenfest?" I asked while sipping Rihyarda's tea. "Let her know that, once I am done with a few errands, I will return home to discuss matters with Aurelia."

"At once."

"I am told you intend to go to your library tomorrow," Rihyarda said. "How fare your belongings there, milady? Should I arrange for servants and carriages to transport them?"

"No, brewing should take priority tomorrow. I expect my belongings to be packed, but I won't discuss moving them with Lasfam until the day after."

"And your chambers in the temple?"

"The plan was always for me to leave Ehrenfest after the Archduke Conference, so they're mostly empty. We can take care of whatever remains when I go there next." There were things I still needed to fetch from there, here, and my library. I also had to decide when to bring my out-of-season clothes and make sure there weren't any issues with my newest attire.

"We have returned, Lady Rozemyne."

I was still working out my schedule with my attendants when my other retainers returned, having finished their introductions and icebreaker.

"Cornelius, Hartmut, and Roderick are staying in Alexandria," Leonore reported. "Cornelius will take over from Laurenz and Matthias when it comes time for them to move, and Hartmut will return to replace Clarissa."

My eyes widened in shock. Were we not going to spend tomorrow brewing the base dye and finalizing Alexandria's crest? I wasn't even allowed to touch the latter, so how was I meant to proceed without Hartmut, my head scholar?

"Clarissa, why is Hartmut, of all people, not here?" I asked. "Wasn't he going to brew and draw the crest?"

"As your head scholar, Hartmut wishes to review as many documents as he can before the Archduke Conference. I was asked to support you in his place."

Because we were from Ehrenfest, we had only a surface-level understanding of the duchy now known as Alexandria. To help remedy this, I'd recently taken on new retainers from among Old Ahrensbach's nobles—candidates whom Ferdinand and my retainers had deemed to be safe and well-intentioned. Among them were scholars who had served the late archduke Gieselfried and supported Ferdinand with his work.

"It is a known fact that Hartmut is highly competent," Clarissa continued. "From the perspective of an Alexandrian scholar, however, he lacks even basic knowledge about the duchy. He aims to remedy that, else he will struggle to negotiate with other duchies and will not be of adequate use to you."

As it turned out, the Alexandrian scholars had expressed their doubts about Hartmut attending the upcoming Archduke Conference with me. Given his age and severely limited understanding of the duchy soon to be his home, they expected him to be replaced in a matter of years.

Well, these are far from the only unusual circumstances.

It was strange enough that a man not even in his twenties had managed to become a head scholar—archducal family members normally assigned someone in their thirties or forties to the role with the understanding that they would also train the apprentices under them.

In my case, various factors had aligned to create my current predicament. Announcing my abrupt adoption during my baptism ceremony had come first, and choosing my scholars had taken much longer than usual, owing to my unique situation as a former commoner and the need to surround me with people who were trustworthy. Combined with most nobles' aversion to the temple, the disdain my methods for advancing the printing industry had earned me among traditional scholars, the two years I'd spent in a jureve, and the fact that Ferdinand had accepted the duty of educating my scholars, it was no wonder that I'd never been assigned an aged scholar.

But our circumstances had changed. We lacked even basic knowledge about Alexandria; Ferdinand was my fiancé, not someone with authority over my retainers; and resistance to the temple was starting to wane. More than that, though, there were *plenty* of nobles who wanted to serve as the new aub's retainer.

"Surely it cannot be helped that Hartmut lacks the expertise to continue serving as my head scholar for the moment," I said. "Is that not why Ferdinand thought to have him assist me with making the base dye and drawing the crest?" Ferdinand must have told me to carry out these duties of a first aub here in Ehrenfest so that Hartmut could retain his honor as my head scholar.

"Hartmut spent a long time contemplating whether he should assist you with your preparations here in Ehrenfest or focus on studying in order to attend the Archduke Conference with you," Clarissa explained. "In the end, he chose the latter. He concluded that if he was not with you for your first conference, he would never be considered your head scholar."

As a greater duchy, Old Ahrensbach had plenty of exceptionally talented scholars. Many of them had been demoted during Detlinde's reign but only because she had personally disliked them or rejected their lucrative ideas. Hartmut would have an especially hard time remaining my head scholar with so many wise old veterans around him, but it hadn't deterred him from trying his best to earn their respect.

"If staying behind is his wish, then I shall support him," I said. "Just be sure to tell him not to overdo it."

"Your encouragement shall drive him to success," Clarissa said with a bright smile. Ottilie must not have been too convinced because she looked thoroughly exasperated.

"Knowing Hartmut, he's going to spend every waking moment until the Archduke Conference studying everything he might need to know. How does he plan to make time for his move?"

"He should return at least once to close his hidden room and such. He said that he would entrust everything else to his family."

"Good grief, that boy..." Ottilie muttered with a troubled smile, having suddenly been tasked with overseeing her son's move. "He could always have been patient and taken the role in a decade or so..."

“But then he wouldn’t be Hartmut,” Clarissa said with a wry smile. “There is no helping it. I will support him however I can.”

Ottilie’s shoulders slumped in response. “I apologize for the burden he has put on you.”

“You mentioned that Cornelius also elected to stay in Alexandria,” I said. “Was that for the same reason as Hartmut? I thought he agreed that Strahl was best suited to be the knight commander.”

The aub’s head knight usually also served as their duchy’s knight commander, but the latter role required one to know not just the names and faces of all the knights working under them but also their factions and ancestry. For that reason, though Cornelius had spent such a long time in my service, he lacked the knowledge to suddenly take charge of Alexandria’s Order.

During a lengthy discussion about whom to assign as the new knight commander, someone had noted that I might feel more comfortable if one of my brothers took the role. Cornelius had already been discounted, so the conversation turned to Eckhart. He had plenty of experience, having lived in Ahrensbach for well over a year, but he would need to join my service first. Nobles had gone to him to propose the idea, only to be turned away in a heartbeat.

“I refuse to serve anyone but Lord Ferdinand. It would not be in Rozemyne’s best interests for someone with my devotion to join her retinue.”

Eckhart had strongly implied that he would stab me in the back to return to serving Ferdinand—a thought so terrifying that I didn’t even want to consider taking him on. In the end, it was agreed that Strahl would join my service instead and return to his former position as the knight commander.

“Cornelius still agrees with Strahl serving as the knight commander,” Leonore assured me. “He chose to stay in Alexandria so you could have at least one Ehrenfest retainer there at all times. Information gathering and contact points are a must. We should finish the move quickly so that he can return.”

Matthias crossed his arms and nodded. “Laurenz and I won’t take long—we just have our things in the knight dormitory to clear out. Cornelius has his home in the Noble’s Quarter, but Leonore has the most on her plate with her rooms in the dormitory and the Leisegangs' estate."

"Don't forget the estate Lord Eckhart gave them for their engagement," Laurenz added with a grin.

Leonore sighed. "My rooms at home and in the estate are almost empty from when we were preparing to move to the Sovereignty. But I only recently started clearing out my room in the knight dormitory and must return to Leisegang to close my hidden room and say my farewells to my family."

The recent war had taken up so much of the time we had meant to spend preparing for the move. Now, we were having to make do with what little remained. I really was demanding a lot from my retainers.

"Um, Leonore," I said. "I—"

"You need not feel troubled, Lady Rozemyne. A short leave of absence is all that I need."

"Granted, of course, but—"

"We really are quite fortunate," Leonore said with a smile. "One normally transports one's luggage by carriage when moving to another duchy, but we have permission to use the dormitories' teleportation circles." She assured me that my own workload was going to be much harder, owing to my many rooms, but I was leaving everything to my attendants. Even trying to help them was a surefire way to be scolded.

"I understand the time constraints, but will you not lack guard knights if everyone makes their preparations at once?" Rihyarda asked.

"Worry not—Angelica plans to take only a single day's leave to close her hidden room. She will spend the rest of her time at work."

"Really?" I asked. "Is that all she needs?" I gathered that she wouldn't require as much time as Leonore, since her family lived in the Noble's Quarter, but a single day couldn't have been long enough to get all of her belongings together.

"Indeed, Lady Rozemyne," Angelica replied. "I need only close my hidden room; Lieseleta and the other attendants in my family will take care of everything else." She seemed touched that her family wanted to help out, but I suspected they simply knew that Angelica would take far too long on her own.

Lieseleta gave a partial smile as if she'd read my thoughts. "I will take a slightly longer break to compensate for my sister."

"Making two people's preparations will not be easy, but I wish you luck."

I ate breakfast, then headed straight to my library while several of my retainers got ready for the move. Damuel and Judithe were accompanying me as knights, Philine and Clarissa as scholars, and Bertilde and Ottilie as attendants.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne," Lasfam said upon my arrival. "Lord Ferdinand's belongings are ready to be moved."

Despite being name-sworn to Ferdinand, Lasfam had needed to stay in Ehrenfest when Eckhart and Justus moved away. A mere layattendant without the means to protect himself would never have survived in Ahrensbach's castle. Now that the dust had settled, he was terribly impatient to reunite with his lord.

"Thank you," I replied. "I come bearing a message from Lord Ferdinand—move to Alexandria as soon as you have memorized these."

I gave him a new registration brooch and some documents Justus had put together about Alexandria's unique plants and metals and the poisons derived from them. My retainers from Old Ahrensbach had received documents of the same nature to memorize. It had surprised them how strictly Ferdinand expected archducal retainers to be on guard against threats.

My retainers from Ehrenfest were also being educated. Lieseleta and Gretia had claimed to have it easy thanks to all the information Ferdinand acquired in Ahrensbach, but I'd never thought plants could warrant such extreme concern.

"Those documents contain the bare minimum one must learn," I said. "Justus made it quite clear that only those who have memorized them can be trusted with poison detection."

"They really are quite detailed," Lasfam said, surprised to see the thick stack of papers. "I heard that he was swamped with administrative work in the castle, but he seems to have pinpointed every single one of the duchy's specialties."

"As I understand it, he gathered the information during last year's Spring Prayer. Do you remember when Detlinde made him circle the duchy? He collected many ingredients as souvenirs."

I thought back to the letter I'd received explaining that Ferdinand and the others were performing Spring Prayer. It had infuriated me to think that Ahrensbach's religious ceremonies were being forced on those from Ehrenfest, but the men in question had seen it as the perfect opportunity to improve their understanding of the duchy's plants and fey creatures and form opinions about the giebes.

"I wish they had given me this information then," Lasfam said. "Having to memorize it all now will delay my move until just before the Archduke Conference, at least. Could it be that Lord Ferdinand wants me to keep an eye on you until your brewing and your move are complete...?"

He gasped in realization.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

Lasfam tapped his neck. I guessed that he was indicating my engagement feystone, but I failed to grasp its relevance.

"From the bottom of my heart, I must congratulate you on your engagement," he said. "No longer are you my temporary lady."

"Indeed. Now that Ferdinand needs you back, our provisional arrangement has come to an end."

"You misunderstand me, Lady Rozemyne. You are engaged to my lord."

And...?

Lasfam's explanation was so vague that I couldn't even piece together his meaning.

Sensing my confusion, he smiled and continued, "Lord Ferdinand intends to keep me here so that I can care for his fiancée as an attendant."

"You... might be overthinking it. Is this not what you've been waiting for? Do not waste your time with me."

"For as long as Lord Ferdinand is occupied, it falls to his attendants to ensure his fiancée is not inconvenienced. Allow me to guide you to the brewing room."

Yeah, he was *definitely* overthinking it. He seemed to be having fun, though, so I elected not to question him further.

"Bertilde, Ottilie—please focus on getting the luggage together," I said. "You may discuss the arrangement of servants and carriages with Lasfam when we are done brewing."

Inside the brewing room, Clarissa and I took out a recipe and a box containing various ingredients, both courtesy of Ferdinand. Damuel and Philine watched us with interest.

"Lady Rozemyne, are those instructions for making base dye?" Philine asked. "Thank goodness. I thought we might need to resort to trial and error."

"Every new duchy has to make its own base dye, so a general outline was easy to come by. The hard part is brewing the color we desire." We would need to measure and mix various ingredients to create the hue we had in mind, meaning trial and error would, in fact, be necessary. "Ferdinand wrote down which materials we should combine to make dark blue, so let's start there."

"Is that so? I wonder... was Lord Ferdinand going to make the base dye, despite how busy he must be?"

"Well, he and Lord Justus do understand Alexandria's plants and such better than the rest of us," Clarissa replied while measuring out some of the ingredients from the box. "He entrusted the task to us, though, as he didn't want to involve Old Ahrensbach's nobles."

It was so interesting to hear Clarissa's insight on the situation. I'd spent most of my time in Alexandria's castle isolated in the aub's living quarters, but she'd worked in Ferdinand's office, meaning she had a better understanding of his thoughts and the nobles' movements than I did.

"Lady Rozemyne, please remove the impure mana from these ingredients," she said, indicating the portions she'd just measured out. "Damuel, Philine, chop them into small pieces when she's done. Judithe, wash the brewing instruments."

Even the guard knights were being made to help out, though I supposed that wasn't particularly rare when it came to brewing.

"I shall prepare the branches with katensell blossoms while you prepare the granaruke fruit."

We followed the recipe and started mixing ingredients into our dye. It produced a reasonably dark blue, but it wasn't quite what we were looking for.

"Next, we shall increase the black absorbency with more Darkness ingredients."

"Would it not make more sense to simply add ingredients that will darken the color?"

"For now, what if we add the katensell and granaruke together? We could also throw in some gold dust."

We debated our options, but my idea to add omni-elemental gold dust was quickly shot down. Not only would it raise the intensity of every single element, but it would also make the recipe much, much harder for future generations to reproduce.

Changing the recipe bit by bit is so tedious, though.

"Lady Rozemyne, could you give Damuel and me some of the dye when it's ready?" Philine asked. "We will need some for when we move."

"That won't be for another two years, so I would rather prioritize the nobles going to the Archduke Conference. Rest assured, though—I will provide you both with dye when you need it."

The morning section of the conference would comprise the inauguration ceremony and the Starbind Ceremonies, during which the nobles of old duchies would wear scarves bearing their old duchies' colors. This applied not only to Old Ahrensbach's nobles but also to the nobles of the duchies soon to be given to Trauerqual and Sigiswald. They would switch to wearing their new capes later in the day, once their new duchies' colors had been announced.

"Once the recipe is complete," Clarissa said, "we will need to make dye for all the participating nobles. I do not have enough mana to manage this on my own, so I must rely on Lady Rozemyne to do most of the work for me. To think I would need to request her help with both that and the trial-and-error part of the process... I am such an incompetent scholar.”

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. My mana quantity and experience with brewing simply make me well suited to mass production.”

Despite my words of encouragement, her mood continued to worsen. It probably didn’t help that we kept failing to produce the right color. I was of the opinion that we just needed something close to the right hue, but Clarissa was hell-bent on making it perfect. “This has none of your hair’s luster!” she would cry. “If we make it our base color, Hartmut will never forgive me!”

“There’s no need to get so worked up about it,” I said. “Even if we don’t get it right this session, we can send our results to Ferdinand and Hartmut. They’re bound to have some advice for us. I’m used to Raimund assisting me with prototypes, so let’s just do what we can, okay?”

From there, we gradually switched up our ingredients and the amounts we added. I wasn’t sure how any of our changes would impact the dye; I merely did as I was told and continued to stir the pot.

“Can you test it, Philine?”

“Right!”

She took scraps of various colors and materials and started dipping them into the dye, making sure they all came out the same shade. Checking the color was much easier than when testing commoner-made dyes because we didn’t have to wash or dry the dyed material.

“How is it, Clarissa?”

“The color looks amazing!” she declared. “If we could just improve the luster, it would be perfect!” She held the cloth to her chest and groaned that we were so, so close.

“Never have I seen a cape with, um... *luster* at the Royal Academy...” I said, exchanging a look with Damuel. “Should that really be one of the criteria for our new duchy’s color?”

“I do not believe so,” he replied. “I thought luster depended on the material, not the color.”

Philine and Judithe cocked their heads at Clarissa.

“I thought we were trying to reproduce the color of Lady Rozemyne’s hair, not its sheen...”

“We plan to dye carpets and tapestries too, right? Would it not be a problem if every room ended up as glossy as her tresses?”

Clarissa paused, having noticed our eyes on her, and then spread out the cloth in her hands. “Fine. This concludes our experimentation for today!”

I ignored Clarissa’s moaning about how wonderful the luster would have been and turned to Damuel. “Please tell Ferdinand we have completed the dye. If all is well, I will start mass-producing it tomorrow.”

We sent the dye to Alexandria, where it received passing marks from Ferdinand and Hartmut. Ferdinand gave me my next instructions in the form of a letter.

“That will do for the base dye. Purchase an Ehrenfest cape, dye it, and then submit the result to the Zent. Contact her retainers when you do. The Zent is busy enough right now, so do not attempt to deliver the cape in person; hand it to your retainers and allow them to do the rest.”

I told my retainers to dye the cape, then asked Clarissa to deliver it alongside our completed crest. In the meantime, I worked as hard as I could to make enough dye for the nobles going to the Royal Academy.

It won’t be long before I can read the new textbooks. Yippee!

Aurelia’s Situation

As my reward for sending Eglantine everything she needed, I was allowed to go through the new textbooks brought in from Alexandria. They had previously belonged to Letizia and covered so many important aspects of the duchy—its terrain, industries, flora, fauna, and most important annual events. It was all pretty standard knowledge as far as Old Ahrensbach’s nobles were concerned, but that didn’t stop me from pouncing on the books as soon as Rihyarda brought them out.

“I’ve been told to memorize as much of this information as I can before the Archduke Conference,” I said. “Philine, will you study with me?”

“Yes, my lady.”

Philine was on a mad quest to learn as much as she could about Alexandria, not wanting to be left in the dust by those who were moving before her. To that end, Letizia’s textbooks were well worth going through. They even contained some documents written by Ferdinand.

“Excellent,” I said. “You may borrow them when I am done. Study them closely before your move.”

“Understood,” she replied, looking up from the books with a broad smile on her face. “Damuel will appreciate having them as well.”

Their relationship really has progressed in my absence.

“Incidentally... when did Damuel pop the question? Or did you propose to him? He mentioned your plans to move to Alexandria together but told me to speak with you when I requested more details. I guess that was partly because we didn’t have much time, but still—it was like he didn’t *want* to tell me.”

“Th-Then I won’t either!” Philine exclaimed, blushing furiously and shaking her head. As much as I wanted to dig deeper, it almost felt like I was bullying her.

“Something happened during Spring Prayer,” Judithe whispered over my shoulder. “She won’t tell me what, though.”

Philine lowered her head and muttered, “Not you too, Judithe... Leave me be...”

“She’s been like this ever since. I’m starting to suspect Damuel backed her into a corner and forced her to agree. Or maybe he did something too awful to mention...”

“Damuel would never! He isn’t that kind of person!”

“No, I suppose not...”

We might not have known the details, but Philine’s outburst made one thing clear: their engagement was the result of a chivalrous discussion, not some forceful act of passion.

“Lady Rozemyne, Judithe,” Leonore interjected, “please stop teasing Philine and get ready to leave. We must visit Lady Elvira.”

“Have you finished clearing out your room in the knight dormitory?” I asked.

“Yes, my lady. My belongings were just moved to Alexandria. I shall greet Lady Elvira today and then go to Leisegang tomorrow. Matthias and Laurenz have departed, so Cornelius should return soon.”

Cornelius arrived with Roderick in tow. The workload in Alexandria must have been intense because they both looked absolutely exhausted.

“Lord Ferdinand has summoned Philine and Damuel,” he said. “He needs scholars proficient in math to help him gather more proof of embezzlement. Laurenz is awaiting them in Ehrenfest’s tea party room.”

Damuel hung his head and muttered, “But I’m not a scholar...” He wasn’t going to protest, of course, so he and Philine started getting together everything they would need.

“No matter what happens, make it clear that you are my retainers,” I told them. “Damuel, though you might sometimes be mistaken for a scholar, that does not make you any less of a knight. Keep a close eye on Philine and make sure she stays safe.”

“Understood!”

“Philine, I received word from Melchior and intend to visit him in the temple tomorrow afternoon. Please inform Ferdinand that I will need you with me—though you can spend the rest of your time in Alexandria uninterrupted.”

“Very well. If you will excuse us.”

I watched the pair go and told Roderick to rest and prepare for the move. Then I turned to Judithe and Angelica.

“Spend the rest of the day as you please; Leonore and Cornelius are going to take me home for a family catch-up. I plan to spend the night there, so come fetch me tomorrow after lunch. You can guard me when I visit the temple.”

They both smiled, nodded, and took their leave. Leonore intended to return to Leisegang, Cornelius had to prioritize his move, and Damuel was busy as a scholar, so there was a good chance Judithe and Angelica would need to guard me until the Archduke Conference without taking any breaks.

“Welcome, Cornelius, Rozemyne,” Elvira said as we alighted our highbeasts. “Leonore, it is lovely to see you again. How are your preparations coming along?”

As we made our way to the parlor, Elvira gestured to Leonore and Cornelius, drawing them into a discussion about the upcoming move and the steps before their Starbind Ceremony. Muriella was called over to chat with me in the meantime.

“Welcome, welcome, Lady Rozemyne!”

Muriella had come of age during my disappearance from the Royal Academy. I couldn’t help thinking that she looked so mature with her hair up. She spent her days gathering manuscripts in Elvira’s service and inspecting the printing workshops, which were slowly increasing in number.

“Philine has her own room here now, in case you didn’t know,” she said. “She uses it during winter socializing and whenever there is a lull in her temple duties.”

Staying in the temple all the time would isolate a noble from important information, which was why Philine had been told to stay in the Noble's Quarter when she could. One of Muriella's many duties was to keep her in the know.

"Um, Muriella... Has your standing not worsened since the war with Ahrensbach?"

"Not mine, no. I am fortunate to have many considerate people looking out for me."

Those who had given their names to escape the purge had needed to be imprisoned in the castle during the Defense of Ehrenfest. Muriella had earned the favor of not just the guards but also Florencia's retainers for being so well-mannered and obedient, whereas Barthold earned their ire for being a general nuisance.

"Barthold might be punished to some degree," Muriella said. "I can only hope his sisters are not dragged down with him."

"Is that still up in the air?"

"Yes, and it should remain that way until after the conference. The archducal family has faced so many unexpected developments that no one has time to even spare him a thought."

Meeting with royalty, attending the transference ceremony, my engagement—Ehrenfest's archducal family had been bounced from one excursion to the next. Getting through the upcoming Archduke Conference was their top priority, so internal matters related to the Defense of Ehrenfest were being kept on hold for the time being.

"I am glad to see you safe, Muriella."

"I am living my best life in Lady Elvira's service. Truly, I cannot thank you and Aub Ehrenfest enough for permitting it."

Seeing her so content brought a smile to my face as well.

"I should one day like to visit this new duchy of yours, Lady Rozemyne. Lady Elvira tells me you hope to make it into a library city. It sounds delightful."

"You understand my dream?!"

I can't believe this! The retainer I gave up is the one who gets me the most!

Before I could come up with a way to seduce her back to my side, she gave an emphatic nod and said, "Yes, I understand it well. I can think of nothing better than an entire city filled with love stories."

Muriella's dreamy expression brought me back to my senses, spurring me to retract my silent invitation. We had very different ideas of the perfect library city. She would have a much better time with Elvira, the queen of romance, than with someone who couldn't even follow along with romantic metaphors.

"It might be time to summon Aurelia," Elvira said aloud.

Muriella excused herself while Leonore and Cornelius moved to stand behind me as guard knights. Thinking about the conversation to come, I couldn't help but sigh; these were truly depressing circumstances.

This isn't going to be pleasant, by any means.

Aurelia entered the parlor—wearing a veil, as always—and called out in surprise upon seeing me. She took the seat Elvira indicated, such that they were both sitting across from me.

"It has been too long," I said. "You must be shocked to see how much I've grown."

"Indeed, I am. Lady Elvira and everyone else told me your appearance had changed, but this is more than I could ever have expected. You look stunning."

"Many nobles have yet to see Rozemyne's growth," Elvira noted, "so you can imagine their concern when they found out about her engagement to Lord Ferdinand. Of course, they are picturing Rozemyne as she was before; I doubt anyone will complain when they see how much she has matured."

We kept the conversation light while the attendants poured our tea. Once they were done and we had cleared the room, Elvira turned to look at me.

"Go on, Rozemyne. You have something important to discuss with Aurelia, do you not?"

"Yes, Mother. It pains me greatly to say this, Aurelia, but the nobles of your former house have been punished. Martina, Detlinde's apprentice attendant, was punished severely.”

Martina was Aurelia’s younger sister who had gone with Detlinde to the Adalgisa villa. Mestionora’s order had prevented her execution, but she had still paid the price for her crimes.

“Her medal was destroyed, erasing her schtappe and reducing her to the status of a commoner,” I said. “She will spend the rest of her days having her mana drained, though I cannot say where. It will need to be decided during the Archduke Conference.”

I’d destroyed the medals of the criminals we’d given to the Sovereignty during Eglantine’s trip to Alexandria. Martina, Detlinde, and many others had been commoners ever since.

Aurelia placed a hand over her mouth. “Will my father receive the same punishment?”

“He was attacked during the Purge of Lanzenave. My sincerest apologies, but... he did not survive.”

Aurelia’s father had conspired with Georgine and then died before he could be punished. His estate was marked, meaning the Lanzenavians shouldn’t have targeted him, and his wife had testified to them eating breakfast together, but he had still succumbed to an attack outside his estate. We thought it might have happened when Lanzenave-allied nobles were being dragged out of their homes and murdered in retaliation.

“His first wife and their children were imprisoned and will receive strict punishment, but his second wife’s fate has yet to be decided. She is inconsolable from having lost both her children at once.”

Aurelia’s father had split his progeny between the duchy’s two prominent factions. His first wife’s children had worked in the castle and cooperated with Detlinde and Georgine, resulting in his first wife’s immediate imprisonment. His second wife’s children had served as Letizia’s retainers. Both had succumbed to Leonzio’s instant-death poison while attending to their lady in the aub’s office.

According to Ferdinand, the second wife clearly hadn’t known about Lanzenave’s plot, so the jury was still out on how harshly she deserved to be punished.

“I see...” Aurelia replied, her voice devoid of emotion. “As cruel as this might sound, I am somewhat glad to hear that my father has passed.”

I simply stared at her, unsure what to say. The embroidered veil covering her face meant I couldn’t even try to read her expression.

“My father was the younger brother of the previous archduke,” she explained. “He had many supporters and would surely have marred your reign with chaos. I, too, might have been exploited to that end. It can only be a good thing that he died amid the fighting.”

She was speaking out of consideration for me and my new duchy. I understood that, but still, it made me uneasy not being able to see her properly.

“Aurelia, it scares me a little that I cannot see your face or tell what you are thinking. My apologies, but... could you remove your veil?”

She choked out a strained “Huh...?” and turned to Elvira for help. She must never have expected me to make such a request.

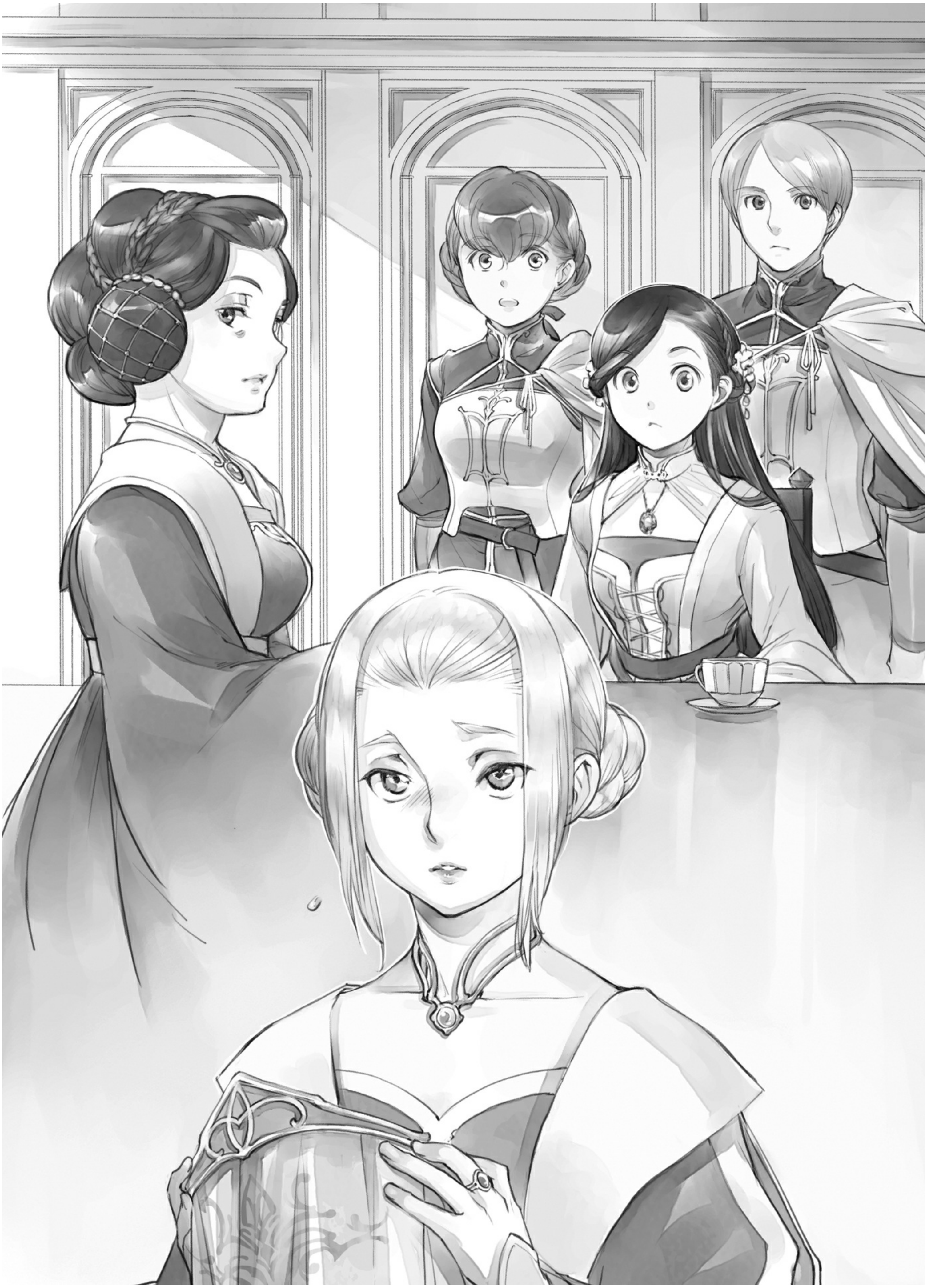
“It is normal to be surprised when someone says she is both relieved and glad to hear about her father’s death,” Elvira noted. “Especially for Lady Rozemyne, who is on good terms even with her adoptive family.”

“I suppose...”

“Please remove your veil,” Elvira said, her tone a little more forceful. “Leonore is engaged to Cornelius, meaning everyone here is your family. We will support Siegrecht as he grows.”

Though she seemed reluctant, Aurelia did as instructed. Her dark-green eyes were sharp and almond-shaped, giving her a somewhat strict appearance. Otherwise, she was a regular beauty. She played uneasily with her veil while awaiting our response.

Leonore was the only one of us who reacted. She took in a sharp breath and muttered, “It’s Lady Gabriele...!”



“I see that neither Lady Rozemyne nor Lord Cornelius is particularly disturbed...”

“Well, I don’t really know how Lady Gabriele looks,” Cornelius said.

“Neither do I” was my response. “Leonore, how do *you* know?”

Gabriele was Veronica’s mother. I understood that she had assertively married from Ahrensbach into Ehrenfest and thus became the source of all the Leisegangs’ misfortunes, but her appearance was a mystery to me.

“My great-grandfather installed a large picture of her in the primary Leisegang estate so our house would never forget our hatred for her,” Leonore explained. “I am reasonably certain Cornelius has seen it before.”

“Maybe during family gatherings, but I scarcely remember. I was too focused on all the trouble Lady Veronica was causing us to look at a painting of a dead woman.” Despite his lack of response to Aurelia’s appearance, Cornelius clearly despised both Veronica and Gabriele.

“That picture is why the Leisegangs all remember Lady Gabriele’s face and Aurelia cannot go outside without her veil,” Elvira said, knitting her brow in vexation. I could understand why she was so frustrated with Leonore’s house, considering how insanely hard she had worked to keep the former Veronica faction from contacting Aurelia.

“It sounds terribly foolish,” I said. “An innocent young lady should not have to live in shame because of a woman who died ages ago.”

“Quite. Aurelia has kept her distance from all nobles associated with Ahrensbach since she married into Ehrenfest, and she interacts favorably with all of my friends. During the fighting, she donned her armor and took up her weapon in defense of this estate. I would rather that not be discounted purely because of her appearance.”

“Lady Gabriele and Great-Grandfather are no longer with us, and the legacy carried on by Georgine ended with the war,” I said. “Leonore, I would advise the prompt removal of that painting. I can understand having a shrine in honor of someone, but no good can come from one based on hate.” I wasn’t going to tell people to simply forget about Gabriele’s and Veronica’s misdeeds, but it was unfair to discriminate against Aurelia because of something she couldn't control.

"I must agree," Leonore said. "I shall tell Mother and Uncle when I return. But for now, please continue your conversation with Lady Aurelia."

Leonore apologized for her overreaction, then took a step back and stood up straight. Aurelia let out a slow breath before folding her veil and placing it neatly on her lap.

"I consider it only natural that my father and sister were punished so severely for aiding a rebellion. My father was a man who resorted to any means necessary to preserve his status, no matter who was in power. He never listened to his wives or children."

Aurelia sounded calm, but her eyebrows were drawn in a look of moderate sorrow. She was worried and in pain despite her stoic noble facade.

"And what of me?" she asked.

"Come again...?"

"After the civil war, siblings and children of the same mother were deemed guilty by association, even those who had married into other duchies. How am I to be punished, then? Are Lamprecht and Siegrecht doomed to the same fate?"

I shook my head. "A response that severe is completely unnecessary. You refused to meet with your younger sister when she visited with Georgine and refrained from associating with Ahrensbach or the former Veronica faction."

As far as I was concerned, only those who had actively cooperated with Lanzenave deserved to be punished. It seemed pointless to reduce our archnoble population even further, and if we weren't going to hold the royals accountable, then we certainly weren't going to thrust the blame on the innocent.

"So I will not be punished despite being direct family to a convicted criminal...?"

"That is correct. I shall not repeat the mistakes of the grand purge."

"I was racked with fear that my husband and son might be punished—or at least troubled—because of my family’s machinations...”

Aurelia’s father had taken complete control of her life prior to her marrying into Ehrenfest. She was finally at peace here, so Detlinde and Georgine’s visit had put her on edge. In her eyes, her Old Ahrensbach family was nothing but a source of anxiety.

“I am so, so grateful,” she said, her face streaked with tears. “I wish only to live peacefully here in Ehrenfest.”

Elvira gave us both a relieved smile, having listened to our conversation in silence. “In the worst-case scenario, I was prepared to take Siegrecht as my own son. I am glad it will not come to that.”

“Siegrecht? Isn’t he Lamprecht and Aurelia’s son?” I asked, remembering the baby born around the time of the purge. Though I’d given him a blessing through Lamprecht, I’d yet to actually meet him; we hadn’t wanted to risk someone taking advantage or revealing his existence to the general public.

“My, what perfect timing,” Elvira said. “Would you care to meet him?”

“Can I? Truly?”

“You decided to become Aub Alexandria just as we thought the situation with Georgine had died down; if we let this chance slip through our fingers, another might not arise for quite some time. So what do you think? Siegrecht would love to meet his Auntie Rozemyne.”

I exchanged a look with Aurelia. We both chuckled and responded in unison.

“That sounds wonderful.”

A Mother's Encouragement

"Siegrecht was adorable," I said. "Considering his size and stamina, I think he's a knight in the making!"

My darling nephew had Aurelia's golden hair, but his eyes and other features reminded me of Lamprecht. He hadn't seemed particularly shy for his age; though he'd stumbled on his feet, he had charged straight toward me as soon as I'd arrived. It was so cute seeing him in his oversize diaper.

"I only hope he learns some control as he gets older. As it stands, he acts entirely on impulse."

Well... he might have gotten that from Bonifatius.

Once we'd seen Siegrecht and eaten lunch, Leonore and Cornelius went to clear out the estate Eckhart had given them. Their belongings would be moved straight to their newly made estate in Alexandria. They were staying in the knight dormitory for now but wanted their new home ready in time for their Starbind Ceremony.

I went to my room with Elvira. She had asked if we could speak in my hidden room one last time before I closed it.

"Leonore and Cornelius are getting married this summer, right?" I asked. "They were thinking about postponing it because of the move, but did anything come of that?"

"The moment Leonore returned to Ehrenfest to pack the last of her belongings, Cornelius was bombarded with proposals from Alexandrian women. He wishes to be Starbound as soon as possible to help him refuse them. Hartmut and Clarissa said they would get married at the same time."

For some reason, Elvira was entirely in the know about when my retainers were getting married. I supposed there was no helping it—the decision was only recent—but I was still peeved that Cornelius's romance was advancing without my involvement.

They’re always leaving me out. Hmph!

“Mother, did you hear about Eckhart and Angelica?”

“I received word that they wish to be engaged again. It was a curt letter that contained nothing in the way of details. Do you know how their decision came about?”

“Yes, for it was I who started the conversation.”

I went on to explain how uneventfully the couple had decided to get back together. Elvira sighed in response and muttered what a shame it was; she must have wanted something a little more passionate. Having witnessed it with my own eyes, I was disappointed too.

“Angelica’s parents have been informed,” Elvira said. “They have given their approval.”

“That was quick...”

“Eckhart and Angelica were engaged once already, and their temperaments make it hard to find partners for them.”

Eckhart was devoted to his late wife and to serving Ferdinand, so anyone he married now would need to be content with third place. As one might expect, few women were open to accepting such an arrangement.

As for Angelica, she wanted a husband stronger than her who would allow her to continue serving me. Given that she’d trained under Bonifatius, it was already a lot to ask for, but it wasn’t the only reason she hadn’t found a partner. Her main problems were socializing and trying to think like a regular noble; she really had put all of her skill points into combat.

“But, well... they *are* a good match for each other,” I said.

“Eckhart will come to fetch his belongings, and I would appreciate you giving Angelica a short leave of absence when he does. I wish to discuss their future plans with them.”

Neither Eckhart nor Angelica would bother coming home for a conversation about their engagement, which was why Elvira wanted to catch them while they were here for other business. They were generally uncooperative, and their parents naturally wanted to speak with them before they hurried away to another duchy.

“If you wish to speak in private, then take this,” an attendant said, entrusting us with a small trolley carrying a tea set. We took it with us into the hidden room.

Elvira poured us each a drink, then leisurely looked around. “It has been almost a year since we last came here together,” she said. Aside from the small table and chairs, there was nothing of any note.

“Has it really been that long?”

Looking back, it was during last year’s Archduke Conference that I circled the shrines and agreed to the Zent’s adoption. My conversation with Elvira had come a short while later. So very much had changed in the span of a single year—more than even I could believe.

“Never again shall I part with a son or daughter in such melancholy...” Elvira said, raising her teacup to her lips and gently blowing. “I spent each day distraught about Eckhart and Lord Ferdinand and the danger they were facing in Ahrensbach.”

She paused, then gave me a small, bright smile. “Well done, Rozemyne. Nobody but you could have accomplished all this.”

If not for the Book of Mestionora, I wouldn’t have been able to mobilize Dunkelfelger, use the country gates, beat Gervasio, or rescue Ferdinand, Eckhart, Justus, and Letizia.

“I still remember that fateful day...” Elvira said. “Eckhart returned through the Royal Academy and requested a change of clothes. I rushed to provide them, and before I knew it, I was being told of your march to rescue Lord Ferdinand. The reports did not stop there—they said it was likely Ahrensbach would invade and that the men of our house would stay in the castle while Lord Bonifatius went to Illgner. Can you imagine what that was like for me?”

Elvira had waited and waited, her heart in her throat. I’d charged into Ahrensbach without a lick of consideration for her and so many others.

I’m sorry I caused you so much worry...

"The news that Lord Ferdinand was safe reached me at the same time as the report that Lady Georgine had been slain," Elvira said. "The men of my house are quick to speak of emergencies and danger but slow to announce success. They could at least have said a word or two to assuage our fears, but alas... I know not to expect such consideration from Karstedt or Lamprecht. Heed my advice: men have their own duties and priorities, and it falls to you as a woman to create your own information network."

I was amazed. In the blink of an eye, she had gone from complaining about her husband and son to giving me sage advice.

"To form your faction in Alexandria, you will require the aid of Old Ahrensbach nobles, but know that all noblewomen must be under your command. No matter how large your faction grows, the aub must not lend their authority to anyone."

"Right."

"Take care not to rely exclusively on intelligence given to you by Lord Ferdinand. You have a tendency not to socialize with other women and to focus entirely on books, but an aub must gather her own information from a variety of sources. Do not leave it all to others."

"Ngh... I shall do my best." I was aware of my overreliance on Ferdinand, and it was true that I neglected some of my duties to prioritize reading.

"You are underage, and the complexities of your upbringing required Aub Ehrenfest to restrict your access to your greater family. I worry that you might not understand the importance of getting along with your relatives and thinking from the perspective of your parents' generation."

"Ottilie expressed the same concerns."

"And it speaks to how vulnerable you seem," Elvira said, looking worried. "You have female attendants your age who will give you their honest opinions, but they are all young and unwed, are they not? Lord Ferdinand understands very little about familial relationships, so I assume he deals exclusively with his retainers and pays barely any attention to their relatives. That will need to change when he gets married and has children..."

Ferdinand now had some older Ahrensbach nobles with plenty of relatives in his service, but it was hard to say whether he would actually make use of them. His trust issues meant he only ever depended on those who were name-sworn to him.

"I am told you have new retainers as well, some of whom I would guess are married," Elvira said. "Take care not to disregard their families or undermine the value of such connections."

I was being taught so much about acting as a proper noblewoman. Was it just the norm for mothers to bestow all sorts of wisdom and warnings on their soon-to-be departing daughters?

Mom had a lot to say before I moved out of the lower city to become Rozemyne.

"Your health has always been a concern, so pay extra attention to it. Strive to live long and fully."

Each piece of advice Elvira gave me teemed with love and concern. Not only was I leaving her, but I was also about to ascend in status; this was her last chance to speak openly with me.

"Though you were not adopted by the previous Zent, there is still a heavy burden for you to bear—you are about to become the country's first underage female aub. Depend on Lord Ferdinand where you can and remember that this is all in the service of creating the library city of your dreams. I cannot wait to see how this new duchy of yours takes shape."

I wanted to make Alexandria a duchy she was proud of. Travel between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach had been restricted for some time now, but that would change under my rule.

"I expect things to have calmed down by the time Leonore and Cornelius have a child," I said. "I do hope you will visit when that day comes."

"Oh my... You should really have invited me to see *your* child," Elvira said, amusement in her dark eyes. "You are engaged, in case you have forgotten."

"Excuse me, Mother, but my wedding will not be anytime soon. Leonore and Cornelius are in love. That isn't the case for Ferdinand and me."

"You will marry when you come of age, and a child will soon follow—judging by Lord Ferdinand's actions during your engagement ceremony, at least. You sought to take him as your husband, did you not? Drawing comparisons to Leonore and Cornelius feels more than appropriate."

Did this have something to do with my declaration that I cared about Ferdinand's happiness? I would shout it from the rooftops if necessary—romantic love meant nothing to me.

"As I said during my engagement, I do not feel any of the passion that features so heavily in your stories," I stressed. "Ferdinand is like family to me."

"And what is wrong with that?"

I was so taken aback by Elvira's response that my mind went blank. She made it sound like it was okay for me and my fiancé not to love each other.

"Most marriages are political," she explained with a serious expression. "A noblewoman cannot refuse an engagement if the head of her house demands it."

Elvira went on to elaborate. Bonds between houses were a priority for noble marriages, and it was normally up to the head of a house to decide their children's engagements. It wasn't rare for a woman to reach the day of her engagement without having seen her husband-to-be's face. As long as the man had a decent reputation, he was good to go. If he was wealthy or trustworthy on top of that, even better.

"You escaped the shackles of this system by finding someone you wished to bring into your family and who wishes to join your family in turn. As long as you feel the same way about each other, does it matter whether those feelings are romantic?"

Right. In this world, love isn't expected.

Everyone around me was always blabbing about love, which had made me think it was a crucial part of getting married. In truth, it wasn't necessary in the slightest.

"So we can be like family even if we're not in love?"

"I think it is wonderful that you were so close even before your engagement. As long as you trust each other, such feelings can come later."

I measured Elvira's response, considering the idea of romance following marriage. "Was that how you and Father fell in love?"

"We did not trust each other until you joined our family. Perhaps we will one day fall in love. Perhaps not."

"WHAAAT?!"

Father! Mother says she still doesn't love you!

It was a shocking revelation. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I opened and closed my mouth, unsure how to respond.

"I would advise you to be just as patient; trying to force love will not make it gush from your heart like a fountain," Elvira said with a composed smile, clearly enjoying my reaction. She brought her teacup to her mouth and took a sip. "You wish to bring Ferdinand joy, and he wishes to protect you on your path ahead. That is all you need. Intense passion might make for good storybook romances, but in the real world, something stable is far more ideal."

Hearing that I didn't need to force my emotions eased my nerves and relieved the tension in my shoulders. Maybe because of my days as Urano, I'd assumed that love always came before marriage.

"Everyone's excitement made me feel kind of... guilty for not being in love," I said. "Maybe a bit panicked too, so this really is comforting to hear."

"I realize this is somewhat tangential, but I must ask—what was engraved in the engagement feystone Lord Ferdinand gave you?"

I clumsily covered my necklace with my hands, trying to hide it from my amused and very curious mother. "If you hadn't built up a reputation for mercilessly teasing your children, I might have told you! You're just going to use it when you write a love story about us!"

"But of course. You charged to his rescue, resisted the fate forced upon you by a royal decree, and marked the start of an entirely new duchy with your engagement. How could any lover of the written arts resist? You are my muse! I simply *must* capture the story in full.”

“At least stick to the facts!” Unless I did something to stop her, she was going to twist the truth into an extravagant fairy tale.

“Goodness me,” Elvira replied with a giggle. “I need only start the book with a disclaimer that the characters, businesses, and occurrences are all the products of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is purely coincidental.”

Seriously?! I taught her that!

“I took up the pen so I could give Lord Ferdinand the happiness he deserves, even if only in a story. Do you really expect me not to write about these events that have made him happier beyond his wildest dreams?”

Gah, that’s right... It was my encouragement that got her to start writing fiction in the first place!

I needed to stop her, but again, my mouth simply refused to cooperate.

“Everyone is looking forward to it, but alas, my children are so uncooperative. I suppose I must use my imagination to determine what he wrote.”

“Mother! Copies of your book will end up in Alexandria! If Ferdinand sees them, he’ll scold me and work relentlessly to remove them from circulation!”

“Fear not—the more creative liberties I take, the more it will seem like a work of pure fiction. And even if he does prevent the book from being sold in Alexandria, he cannot stop me from distributing it elsewhere. Ohohoho.”

At that moment, I felt true fear. Ferdinand would probably be able to convince Aub Ehrenfest to stop selling the book, but he would need to wait until the next Archduke Conference to make his appeal. Elvira would have an entire year to spread the story far and wide. Her competency was terrifying.

“Rozemyne, I wish you even greater joy than in the pages of my story. You must find your own happiness before you can spread it to others.”

Temple Attendants

I’d just eaten breakfast the next morning when Elvira’s seamstresses arrived with a slew of new clothes. I was surprised, to say the least—there were far more items than I’d ordered, some of which bore designs I’d never seen before. I expressed my curiosity and found out that many of the garments belonged to Florencia and to Bonifatius’s late first wife; Elvira had asked the seamstresses to gather and alter them for my use during the Archduke Conference.

I tried on the clothes and gave my thoughts. My next tasks for the day were to eat lunch and then head to the temple, where I would inform my attendants and the Gutenbergs of our plans for the move, make various arrangements, and meet with the new head of the Plantin Company.

Elvira’s attendants took the table and chairs out of my hidden room. I waited until the room was empty before touching its magic circle and closing it for good.

“We are glad to see you leave the nest but sad as well,” one of the attendants told me, clearly emotional. They had taken care of me since I first came to the estate as Rozemyne. “Your growth must feel so abrupt because we have known you since your baptism. Though you spent relatively little time here, many wonderful changes have come about since your arrival. I hoped we might see you more regularly, but alas...”

The attendants here had assumed they would see more of me once the divide between the Leisegangs and the archducal family was resolved and socializing with my extended family became less of an issue. It was unfortunate, but the aub of another duchy would be treated as a visitor in Ehrenfest’s castle and certainly wouldn’t be able to visit an estate such as this.

“It is a shame that faction politics prevented me from coming more often,” I said. “Still, I am grateful to all the staff of this estate.”

“You are grateful to us...?”

"I was raised in the temple, so this estate was my first experience with noble society. Had you all mocked me or looked down on me because of my background, I might never have been adopted."

It was because everyone in this estate had accepted me that I'd reached my adoption without realizing how much noble society looked down on people raised in the temple. My status as an archducal family member had protected me from then on, but I didn't even want to imagine what might have happened to me without their support. Elvira and Ferdinand would have looked out for me, sure, but the attitude of the attendants in one's room was especially important.

"Attendants," I said, focusing on them, "I thank you ever so much for accepting me as a daughter of the estate. Be proud; you raised Aub Alexandria."

"Ohoho, I suppose I am. My children will not hear the end of my boasting, I assure you. I am proud to have spent this time with you, Lady Rozemyne."

The attendants began discussing their old memories of me.

"Even back then, she was an exceptionally quick learner."

"Remember when she picked out clothes for her baptism? Lady Elvira couldn't decide between two outfits, so she ordered them both!"

"Lady Rozemyne was so eager to see the book room that she collapsed in the hallway."

"To think she's engaged... It feels like only yesterday that she was too scared to go to the bathroom at night."

It wasn't going to the bathroom that scared me—it was those slimy things inside the toilet!

As much as I wanted to correct them, I wouldn't gain anything from it; they would smile and nod at my "obvious excuses." I wished they wouldn't discuss all these embarrassing memories right in front of me, but most of what they remembered about me was from my early days at the estate. We hadn't really done much together since.

I proceeded to the entrance hall while the ladies continued to exchange stories. My guard knights had apparently come to get me.

“Over here, Lady Rozemyne.”

I spied Judithe and Angelica waiting by the door. Philine had gone to the temple ahead of us. Muriella was with them, carrying the tools of a scholar.

“You intend to meet with your merchants in the temple, no?” Elvira asked. “Please let Muriella go with you. I wish to form my own connection with the new head of the Plantin Company.”

I nodded and said, “Certainly. Let us go, Muriella.” The future of Ehrenfest’s printing industry depended on Elvira’s relationship with the Plantin Company.

Before taking my leave, I turned to the line of attendants who had gathered to say farewell. I would still see Elvira in the Royal Academy’s dormitory and during the Archduke Conference, but I would never see these attendants again.

“In the past, female archduke candidates leaving their home duchy would entreat Jugereise the Goddess of Separation for her divine protection,” I said. “I would ask you to pray to her, not to Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time.”

“As you wish, Lady Rozemyne. May you be blessed by Jugereise the Goddess of Separation.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

And with that, I set out for the temple.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

Philine wasn’t the only one awaiting our arrival—all of my temple attendants had gathered with her. It was a rare sight, considering that Gil and Fritz were usually so busy in the workshop.

“Thank you,” I replied. “Fran, Zahm—I suspect Philine and the others have already told you, but it has been formally decided that I shall become Aub Alexandria.” I asked them to come with me, and they smiled warmly in response.

“We have also been told that the gods granted you and Lord Ferdinand their guidance,” Fran said.

"Yes, indeed... Erwaermen and Mestionora were bad enough, but then all those other gods got involved. It was awful."

My brow lowered into a bitter frown as I remembered shining from the divine power, losing my memories, and very nearly dying. Fran and Zahm must not have expected my response because they both stared at me like they couldn't believe their ears.

"Hmm...?"

"Lady Rozemyne, we meant to congratulate you on your engagement to Lord Ferdinand..." Zahm said, looking troubled. "You *did* get engaged, did you not?"

"Oh, I see... Yes, we completed our engagement ceremony. This is my engagement feystone, which nobles give to one another when getting engaged." I presented my necklace in an attempt to distract them from my blunder.

"Lady Rozemyne," Judithe whispered, "nobody else would think he meant a genuine encounter with the gods."

That may be true, but still... I thought they were bringing it up because it was a cool and really interesting thing to happen to someone!

I turned around. Judithe smiled and gestured to Fran and the others, indicating that we should continue our conversation inside.

Philine gave a firm nod. "Lady Rozemyne, shall we discuss the move in the High Bishop's chambers? There have been so many major changes to our plans that Judithe said we should get everyone on the same page before speaking with Lord Melchior. That is why I gathered all of your temple attendants here today."

Fran and Zahm made their way into the temple. I tried to follow them, but a child's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"You'll be late if you don't hurry up!"

"We're coming! We're coming!"

Surprised to hear shouting inside the temple, I turned toward the source of the noise. Dirk was calling up to the third floor while a group of apprentice blue shrine maidens rushed downstairs.

“Dirk, we have guests visiting the temple,” Fran said, chastising the boy. “You must speak quietly when outside your room. Children’s voices produce especially loud echoes.”

Dirk and the apprentices recoiled, then sincerely apologized.

Fran turned to the attendants and said, “It is important to prepare ahead of time so that the one you serve does not need to rush.”

“Oh, Lady Rozemyne! Welcome!” Dirk exclaimed, smiling from ear to ear the moment he saw me with Fran. As adorable as he looked, it wasn’t appropriate behavior for a noble. I still remembered all the times people scolded me for not keeping my emotions under control.

“It is good to see everyone so lively. I am told you worked very hard during Spring Prayer,” I said. “Is there somewhere you need to be?”

“There’s a study session about religious ceremonies being held in one of the meeting rooms,” Dirk replied, doing his best to sound polite. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must be going.”

He took his leave, having found the perfect opportunity to escape Fran’s lecturing.

Together with the others, I continued through the temple until we reached the High Bishop’s chambers. I would normally change immediately upon my arrival, but Fran pointed to a work desk.

“Over here, if you would.”

There were boxes piled in the corner of the room. Monika and Nicola were preparing tea instead of my High Bishop robes.

“Do I not need to change?” I asked.

Fran shook his head. “Once it was clear that Ehrenfest would need to perform Spring Prayer without you, Lord Melchior was formally inaugurated as the High Bishop.”

Melchior had taken over as the High Bishop while I was fighting in the Sovereignty and meeting with the royal family. It was the right choice, without a doubt, but it saddened me to think that the temple had changed without me. Not having to wear the robes meant there was no longer a place for me here.

“Then I will need to close this sooner rather than later,” I said, heading not to the desk but to the chambers’ hidden room. Anyone with an approved registration brooch could access it, so it had already been cleared out. I double-checked to make sure it was empty before closing it. I really had spent a long time in there, if one counted my two years in a jureve.

“Lady Rozemyne, what are these ‘major changes’ you wish to report?” Fran asked once I was seated at the desk, speaking as everyone’s representative.

“I was going to move to the Sovereignty as the king’s adopted daughter but decided to become the aub of Old Ahrensbach instead. Following that, the temple of my new duchy will need to be revolutionized to meet our standards.”

I explained that Alexandria’s temple had many of the same problems that had once plagued this one, that I intended to take in those orphaned during the war, and that I wanted to set up my own temple classrooms.

“Um... My apologies, Philine, but I need to move Fran and Zahm to Alexandria before I come of age.” I’d wanted to leave one of them behind to support her, but revolutionizing the temple meant I needed as many of the attendants who had improved things here in Ehrenfest as I could get.

“They are both ready to leave, but what of Monika and Nicola?” Philine asked. “Do you plan to take them too?” She understood that Fran and Zahm would probably move with me; Ferdinand and Hartmut had approached them both after the Defense of Ehrenfest. Thinking about all the work they must have done for my sake made me feel a little guilty.

“I wish to bring Fran immediately—and preferably Zahm as well. Monika and Nicola, however, must remain here until you come of age. They are welcome to move with you, should they so desire.”

“As long as they stay with me, I should be fine... but I would appreciate at least one more attendant who is good with paperwork,” Philine said hesitantly.

I saw nothing wrong with her taking a new attendant, especially when I was taking Fran and Zahm, who were both known for their paperwork skills. I gave her permission, then looked to Wilma and Gil.

“I spoke of purchasing the two of you after coming of age, but the circumstances have changed. Now, I would ask you to come with me and spend time living in Alexandria’s temple.” I needed Wilma to help look after the war orphans in the girls’ building and set up an appropriate learning environment, while Gil was important for his knowledge of operating the workshop. “Perhaps you could remain a gray shrine maiden and priest, move with the Plantin Company, and assist with the reform. I could purchase you afterward.”

“That is fine with me,” Wilma replied. “I would feel much safer in the temple with you than in the castle, and the essence of my role—caring for children who have lost their parents—would remain the same.” It was an easy decision for her, as her greatest fear had always been having to leave the temple.

My eyes turned to Gil, whose shoulders were slumped.

“I don’t mind moving with you, since that was the plan from the start, but I was hoping to leave the temple...” he said.

Zahm gave his fellow attendant a pat on the back. “I know you want a change of pace, but you understand the temple workshop better than the rest of us. I would not be much help in setting up a new one, and the same goes for Fran; we each have our own areas of expertise.”

“Yeah, that’s true...” Gil said, crossing his arms with a nod. “The temple is its own separate world, and no one is better equipped to start a new printing workshop than I am. Not to mention, having a history of working with the temple should make it easier for the Plantin Company to get along with the Merchant’s Guild. I know Benno and Lutz were worried about developing their store in a new duchy.”

Gil was of the opinion that the Merchant’s Guild wouldn’t be able to look down on the Plantin Company when I consistently depended on them for work. It was a perspective unique to him, for he was raised in the temple but had experience going out into the world of merchantry.

“I promise to purchase you and grant you freedom from the temple when I come of age,” I said. “Until then, I ask only that you help with its renovation. You were the first to plead with me to change the temple, were you not?”

“Ah...”

It was Gil who first asked me to save the abused orphans when he learned about the harrowing state of the basement. I smiled, remembering when Ferdinand asked me whether I was resolved to become the orphanage director and the anxiety that had overwhelmed me as a result.

“Gil,” I said, “I want you to be a role model for Alexandria’s orphans.”

The temple’s workshop had only done so well because Gil actively cooperated with Lutz. His work with the Plantin Company and the other Gutenbergs had given him a life outside the temple, and I hoped that would continue in Alexandria.

“You can inspire the orphans by leaving the temple to work in the lower city, like Volk did when he left to start a family. Fewer people will mock grays and orphans once they are on equal terms with the children of merchants. Do provide your support until the new workshop finds its footing.”

Gil stuck out his chest, showing not a trace of worry that he might be kicked out of my attendants. His self-assured grin spoke to his growth, and I could tell at a glance that he took great pride in his job. No one who saw him now would guess that he had once been the temple’s worst problem child.

“Understood. As someone used to your crazy demands who set up workshops all over the duchy—not just in the temple—I guarantee that you can count on me. Of course, I doubt I can manage on my own, so I wish for at least three assistants to accompany me.”

Gil then turned to Fritz, already thinking about the future. “Running the workshop on your own won’t be easy. You should ask Lady Rozemyne to let you take a partner.”

“Indeed. Lady Rozemyne, would you ask Lord Melchior or Lord Kazmiar to take Bartz as a workshop manager? I would rather Dirk take him, but I realize that is out of the question.”

Taking a new attendant significantly increased one’s cost of living. Bartz would spend most of his time as a manager in the workshop, and Dirk didn’t have the funds to provide for an attendant who wouldn’t really tend to him in his room.

“Certainly. I shall ask Melchior. Fritz, would you take issue with serving him?”

“Not at all. It would be tough to protect the workshop without being the High Bishop’s attendant, and I would appreciate a position where I can speak directly to the archducal family.”

I took a moment to absorb my attendants’ stances and then sighed. My destination changing from the Sovereignty to Alexandria had caused all sorts of complications. I expected Benno to give me a stern glare during our looming discussion, but I needed to ask him to help Fran and the others move sooner than expected. Having them set out on such a long-distance trip on their own wasn’t an option.

And all these wooden boxes need to be moved.

“My belongings are mostly ready for transport, so I plan to borrow carriages and servants from the castle and give this room to Melchior posthaste.” I wasn’t the High Bishop anymore, so I couldn’t keep monopolizing these chambers.

“If you do that, Lady Rozemyne, we will not have anywhere to ourselves until we leave...”

“Aah...” In my hurry to hand over the chambers, I’d completely forgotten their connection to Fran’s and the others’ rooms. “Philine, could they borrow the rooms in the orphanage director’s chambers until then?”

The orphanage director’s chambers had two floors for its attendants; those of the same gender as their charge stayed on the upper floor, while everyone else slept on the floor below. It would aid us greatly if we could use the rooms that had once gone to Fran and Gil.

My idea caused Judithe to frown. “Lady Rozemyne, living with men not in her service will only tarnish Philine’s reputation. They might be on separate floors, but it still counts as the same chambers.”

Gah! Noble standards!

They had completely slipped my mind. I was racking my brain for a solution when Muriella interjected.

“Does she need to sleep in the temple? She has rooms in the castle and Lord Karstedt’s estate.”

“Good point,” Philine replied. “We aren’t so busy that I need to live in the temple, and it was already my intention to stay in the castle before Lady Rozemyne’s departure. Fran and the others are welcome to use the orphanage director’s chambers.”

I nodded. Now that Philine had given her approval, my temple attendants could use the orphanage director’s chambers when I gave the High Bishop’s chambers to Melchior. I was relieved to know they were going to be okay.

“Lady Rozemyne—though I am reluctant to ask, could you stop by the orphanage? Delia wishes to speak with you.”

“Someone from the orphanage is summoning *Lady Rozemyne*?” Judithe and Muriella asked together, their eyes wide with shock.

“Only out of necessity,” I explained. “Aub Ehrenfest has forbidden Delia from ever leaving the orphanage. We have time before fifth bell, and I was hoping to see the orphanage one last time before my departure. I will go there now.”

Wilma set out ahead of us to deliver the news. Gil and Fritz headed to the workshop.

“Philine,” I said, “I need documents summarizing how many Gutenbergs are moving with their families and whatever information we’ve obtained about the new head of the Plantin Company. Can you fetch them for me?”

“We have the information you seek, but we’ve yet to actually compile it.”

“Please have it done before our meeting with the merchants at fifth bell.”

“Very well. I shall return to the orphanage director’s chambers at once.”

“Lady Rozemyne, may I accompany Philine?” Muriella asked. She was here as a scholar, having been sent by Elvira, and would certainly be of more use formulating documents than visiting the orphanage.

“Certainly. Do what you can to assist her.”

The pair departed with Monika and Nicola, while I went to the orphanage with Fran and the others.

“Lady Rozemyne...” Fran said. “I am glad to have been asked to move with you and Lord Ferdinand, but I grow more anxious as we near the end of our preparations. It feels like I am giving up my place here.”

“I know how you feel,” Zahm added. “As much as I look forward to my new life, it makes me terribly sad to say farewell to all the people and places I care about.”

Gil would eventually leave the temple to live elsewhere, but not Fran and Zahm. They must have been even uneasier than they were letting on, and it fell to me as their lady to support them. I steeled my resolve as we arrived at the girls’ building.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne.”

I gazed around the orphanage’s dining hall while the gray shrine maidens greeted me. They could now make food and sustain themselves when the blue priests’ gifts weren’t enough. I spied bookshelves and toy boxes filled with learning materials in the corner.

Things really have changed...

It wasn’t just the orphanage that stood out to me—the people had changed too. More of them were baptized now, and some had even come of age.

Tuuli came of age too, and Lutz’s ceremony takes place at the end of summer. If he moves to Alexandria before then, won’t that mean his family can’t celebrate with him?

As I contemplated whether to postpone Lutz’s departure, I locked eyes with Delia. Seeing her filled me with nostalgia; I’d visited the orphanage countless times, but quite a while had passed since our last meeting. Once again, I was reminded of the length of my absence.

“Lady Rozemyne, may I have a moment of your time?” she asked.

I agreed, and she rose to her feet. It hadn’t been as obvious when she was on her knees and bowing her head, but she looked especially unwell. I could tell she was forcing herself to smile.

“I just spoke with Dirk,” I said. “I was relieved to see him well, but you, Delia, look a little worse for wear.”

“I cannot bear being apart from him,” she replied, then cast her light-blue eyes down. “At long last, I understand what you meant by not wanting to be separated from your family.”

Delia must have been thinking about the events of the past. Bezewanst and Count Bindewald tricking her into putting Dirk’s name on a submission contract, our fight against Count Bindewald, my imploring Sylvester to save her life... Various thoughts came and went.

There was a moment of silence before Delia looked up again. “May I keep this with me?” She held out the submission contract for Dirk we had prepared in case of an emergency. It was years old, meaning she must have kept it safe all this time. “Dirk sometimes visits the orphanage, and he is having as hard a time as you can imagine. I wish to depend on you if everything becomes too much for him.”

In short, Delia wanted to keep the contract as a protective charm or last resort. I took it from her nonetheless; I couldn’t allow her to use it.

“My apologies, but no. Dirk is no longer an orphan with the Devouring—he is a noble of Ehrenfest. I am neither the High Bishop nor the orphanage director, and soon, I will not even be a member of this duchy’s archducal family. It would not be right to bind him to me without Aub Ehrenfest’s permission.”

I was about to be recognized as the new Aub Alexandria; I couldn’t risk doing anything that might become a major interduchy incident. The look on Delia’s face told me she hadn’t expected my response.

“If something happens to Dirk, first rely on Melchior, the High Bishop, or his backer, the aub,” I stressed. “Do not mistake this order. A careless action on your part could put Dirk in a more desperate situation than before and make a resolvable problem completely uncorrectable.”

Delia paled and clasped her hands in front of her chest. In the past, she had put her faith in the wrong man, exposing Dirk to danger and almost bringing about her own execution. I could tell she wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

"If you first receive Aub Ehrenfest's permission, I will do all that I can to help Dirk," I said. "That much I can promise you."

"Right."

I could see the sorrow in Delia's eyes. Now that Dirk was a noble, she must have felt like she'd lost her purpose. She needed a duty that only she could perform.

"Delia, Dirk became a noble because he knew orphans and gray priests alone would not be enough to stand against the tyranny of nobles," I said. "He did it to protect the orphanage—to protect you."

"I know, but—"

"You are duty bound to protect the orphanage with him."

Delia said nothing in response; she just stared at me like she didn't understand.

"As a noble, Dirk will protect the orphanage from the outside. I want you to protect it from the inside."

"From the inside?"

"If not properly managed, it could crumble even without noble interference. Its children would not have anyone to care for them. I want you to promise me you will not let that happen."

"Um... That might be too much to promise on a whim..." Delia muttered. Though she wore a slight grimace, I could see life returning to her eyes. I couldn't help but chuckle at how easy it was to motivate her.

"I want you to be the orphanage's big sister," I said, trying to invoke the same feeling as when I'd asked her to care for Dirk. "Treat all the orphans and apprentices here like family."

Delia's shock gave way to a chuckle, and she let out a quiet "Geez..." Then she took a deep breath. "*Geez*, Lady Rozemyne! You always dump so much work on me!" She was pretending to be annoyed, but her great big smile made her true emotions clear. I wasn't scared in the slightest.

"But you can manage it, can you not?"

“Of course!” she declared. “So... I promise. I’ll become the orphanage’s big sister and protect it from the inside.”

Meeting with the Merchants

Once we'd concluded our business in the orphanage, I went to Melchior's room. An ordonnanz had informed us that we should go through the documents before the merchants arrived.

"Rozemyne," Melchior said when he saw me, "I am glad you could make it."

Seeing my cute younger brother in his High Bishop robes made me less upset about leaving the temple and more remorseful. His inauguration had come and gone, but my belongings kept him from moving into the chambers he deserved. I refused to make him wait much longer.

"I will clear out my chambers and give them to you as soon as I can. I never thought my absence during Spring Prayer would require us to accelerate the handover."

"It's fine," he said. "Our original plan was to do it right before the Archduke Conference. And you didn't expect to spend so long in Ahrensbach, so..."

"On a more important note..." Kazmiar indicated a desk covered with documents, some of which belonged to my retinue. "Might we discuss your attendants' schedules?"

"I apologize for the sudden change of plan, but I wish to bring Fran, Zahm, Wilma, and Gil with me to Alexandria's temple," I said. "Monika and Nicola will join Philine's service, while Fritz will serve Melchior. I would also like three gray priests to help establish a new workshop."

Kazmiar knew about Ferdinand and Hartmut's scouting. He crossed his arms, seeming troubled, and plainly replied, "If Fran and Zahm both leave the High Bishop's chambers, only Monika and Nicola will understand its responsibilities."

I tilted my head at him. "Back when I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden, the High Bishop did so little work that Ferdinand was forced to take over his duties. Lothar, Gido, and his other attendants from that time should also know how to do them. Isn't that right, Fran?"

Zahm had joined my service when I took over as the High Bishop so that Fran had someone to help with the workload. He had understood the job from the start, so I suspected that any of Ferdinand's old attendants would fit the bill.

"Ymir and Kurt spent very little time doing High Bishop work, but Lothar and Gido would do perfectly. Lord Ferdinand took over such duties while Lady Rozemyne was in her jureve."

Zahm nodded in response to Fran's explanation. Kazmiar was the current High Priest, so they were both extremely serious; they wouldn't be able to leave the temple without his permission, no matter what Ferdinand or I said.

"Could you not take new attendants in both chambers and ask those with experience to educate those without?" Zahm asked. "If you base your search on the same criteria as Lord Ferdinand, then you should find some relatively skilled candidates."

"So say Fran and Zahm," Kazmiar said. "Lothar, what do you think?"

At once, all eyes fell on him.

"Gido and I are the only ones still familiar with the High Bishop's chambers, while Ymir and Kurt are the same for the High Priest's chambers. To that end, I would advise taking new attendants who are excellent with paperwork."

Kazmiar nodded. "I will need to ask about Lord Ferdinand's criteria later."

From there, I mentioned my desire for a new person to help run the workshop. "Now that Gil plans to move with me, we would propose that either you or Melchior ask Bartz to start working as the workshop's manager. It is much too risky to leave Fritz on his own; who will take over if something happens to him or if circumstances require him to go on a long trip?"

They both agreed to my request. As neither Melchior nor Kazmiar was involved with the workshop, they understood the amount of trouble not having a manager would cause them.

"Melchior, Kazmiar—the temple workshop was made so that the orphans could sustain themselves," I said. "Under no circumstances should you take that from them." I wouldn't tolerate them using their noble authority to steal from the orphans.

“Do you really think I would do that, Sister?”

“We live in a harsh world, Melchior; when money moves, cruelty and embezzlement are sure to follow. It is your duty as an archduke candidate to not only avoid extortion but also ensure that it does not entrap those around you. More people than you would expect think poorly of orphans having an income and would jump at the chance to take it for themselves.”

I didn’t think Melchior or Kazmiar would resort to embezzlement, but the latter had grown up in a society that scorned the temple. He had a side to him that wouldn’t hesitate to sever the orphans’ lifeline.

I continued, “No matter how talented a scholar might be—no matter how well they treat you personally—they might not have the temple’s best interests at heart. Dirk and Konrad feared such nobles and sought positions from which they could protect the orphanage. Melchior, I ask you to support Dirk for the sake of the orphanage and the temple at large.”

“Understood. As the High Bishop, I *will* protect the orphanage.”

I checked the documents and reassignment plans Kazmiar laid out, then got Fran and Zahm to prepare the money for the transfers. Kazmiar heaved a heavy sigh as he watched.

“More than anything else, Lady Rozemyne, we are sad to see you go. I never thought Spring Prayer could require so much mana; it would seem the temple has depended on your capacity for quite some time. We concluded this year’s ceremony without incident by using the feystones filled with your divine power, but I truly fear for next year.”

Even when Wilfried and Charlotte had circled the duchy for Spring Prayer, they had used feystones containing my mana. They were older now and wouldn’t need quite as much support, but they still weren’t relying exclusively on their own mana or preparing their own feystones.

“Kazmiar, it was decided that aubs could petition the Sovereign temple during the Archduke Conference to return the blue priests taken from them,” I said. “Relay this information to the archduke, if you would.”

“That would aid us greatly. We are in dire need of more blue priests and shrine maidens.”

To begin with, Ehrenfest’s temple severely lacked adults. It comprised mostly children, as one could see from the new apprentices and those assisting the archducal family. Looking at it now, one would never believe there had once been a time when only adults could participate in religious ceremonies.

“The returning blue priests and shrine maidens might still not be enough,” I said. “I would advise coming up with a way to bring more nobles into the temple. You could create a scenario where they would scramble for a place.”

“Oh? How would we do that?” Kazmiar asked, leaning forward. I was proposing the solution to what he saw as a serious issue.

“Make it so that only those who obtain more than fifteen divine protections during their repeated protections ritual can serve the archducal family. Or prioritize those who obtain more than ten as retainers at the Royal Academy. You will need the archduke’s permission in either case, but both should work nicely.”

“Lady Rozemyne, that sounds much too...” Kazmiar fell silent, but the look on his face spoke to how abnormal my idea seemed to him.

“It is far from unreasonable. If one dedicates a certain amount of mana to a divine instrument, they become able to form it themselves. My retainers competed to see who could create one first and obtained more divine protections in the process.”

“I appreciate your advice, Lady Rozemyne. I shall not soon forget it.”

I signed the documents and paid as much as was necessary for the attendants I wanted. Simply moving them from one temple to another was far cheaper than buying them fully. I might have been late to realize it, but the Sovereign temple had severely underpaid the duchies that had sold them their blue priests and shrine maidens. It was a pretty irritating discovery.

“Lord Melchior, the Plantin Company has arrived at the back gate,” a guard announced.

Melchior sent one attendant to greet them while the others started making tea. The room was much busier than a moment ago.

"Angelica, send an ordonnanz to Philine," I said. "Fran, let us go welcome our guests."

We headed to the room that was used when meeting merchants, and our guests soon arrived. Benno entered first, then a man and woman I'd never seen before. Behind them were Dimo, Zack, Johann, Josef, and almost all of the other Gutenbergs moving with us. Heidi was absent, having once again been left at home.

It really is strange seeing Benno here without Lutz and Mark...

They were together so often that one might think they were inseparable. I supposed that Lutz and Mark had elected not to come today because we were meeting the Plantin Company's new store owner.

I turned my attention to the pair I didn't recognize. Now that I was actually focused on her, the woman was obviously Benno's sister—they had the same hair and eye color, and she had Corinna's dainty features. The man must have been her husband.

"Allow me to introduce Jares and Milda, the new heads of the Plantin Company," Benno said. "Going forward, they will serve as the store's representatives during meetings at the temple. May today's gathering be useful to us all."

The couple approached Melchior and me. "Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water, who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting."

"Jares, Milda—from the bottom of my heart, may the Goddess of Water bless you both."

Once we'd greeted our guests, we gestured them to their seats.

"Milda is my sister," Benno explained. "She is younger than me but older than my other sister, Corinna. Though she was living in another city with her husband, I summoned her back to inherit the Plantin Company. She was educated to inherit my old store, so you need not worry about a drop in sales."

Oh, right... Benno said she took a husband from another city so she wouldn't need to marry one of the guildmaster's sons. At least, I think he did...

We had discussed the matter so long ago that I couldn't remember the details, but that was neither here nor there. I trusted Benno's younger sister to do right by his store. She was bound to be just like Corinna—warm and smiley with an intense thirst for profit.

"We might seem like newcomers, but rest assured, we have been involved with the Plantin and Gilberta Companies for years," Milda said. "We provided ingredients to be used in rinsham, plants to help with paper-making, and ingredients to aid with researching new ink."

Isn't that to say I was completely wrecking Benno all that time ago?

Milda continued, "I was born and raised in this city and educated to inherit the Gilberta Company. I also have excellent bargaining power against both the Othmar Company and the Merchant's Guild."

Wait... Is she going to blackmail the guildmaster with the circumstances of her marriage? If so, she really is Benno's little sister. I can already tell she's twice as lethal as Corinna. Even when Benno's gone, the Plantin Company's sure to be safe in her hands.

"I came here today hoping to meet those who will manage the workshop after Lady Rozemyne's departure," Milda explained. "Would that be alright?"

"Fritz will continue to oversee it, with Bartz joining him as an administrator," Kazmiar replied. "Lord Melchior, would you like me to summon them?"

"Yes, thank you."

Benno looked deeply concerned as he watched the trio's conversation. I deduced the reason and tried to put his mind at ease.

"Fritz and Bartz will both serve Melchior, meaning the temple workshop will remain under archducal management."

"We appreciate your consideration."

It was extremely important to the commoner merchants whether the aub's family or other nobles would run the workshop. Benno relaxed a little, then put on his merchant smile and gave me an intense look.

"In that case, Lady Rozemyne, might I ask you to explain where we are going and when? The reports we received are so at odds with one another that we have no idea how to decipher them.”

Eep! Benno’s furious! He might be smiling, but there’s fury in those dark-red eyes!

“We spent the past year preparing to move to the Sovereignty at the end of spring,” he said. “Then, halfway through the season, a guard at the east gate told us you were becoming the new Aub Ahrensbach. We found that strange enough, so you can imagine our confusion when Lady Brunhilde brought us schematics for our new stores and workshops in Alexandria. I would appreciate some clarity on the matter.”

From his perspective, my destination had changed from the Sovereignty to Ahrensbach to Alexandria in the span of a single season. Now he didn’t know what was going on. I could sympathize with his irritation at not knowing whether to continue with his preparations.

I wish I could explain it all, but I can’t... Don’t get mad at me!

The truth of the matter was that I’d obtained my own Book of Mestionora, stolen a foundation to rescue Ferdinand, and then almost died to the gods themselves. I wouldn’t have minded saying all that in the privacy of a hidden room, though I wondered what it would actually accomplish; Benno and the others hadn’t been exposed to much magic in their lives, so they wouldn’t even be able to comprehend most of my story.

“Um, I sincerely apologize for the abrupt change, but I am moving to Alexandria instead of the Sovereignty. Of course, I should note that Alexandria is more or less just Ahrensbach under a new name. I will officially become its aub during the Archduke Conference.”

“Lady Rozemyne, an aub...?” Benno muttered, slightly displeased with the idea. His tone reminded me that most people saw an enormous contrast between moving to the Sovereignty and moving to another duchy. Not wanting him to pull out now, I desperately attempted to keep him on board.

“The Gutenbergs are my valued personnel, so I apologize that my circumstances impacted your move. Do not let it distract you from the sheer excellence of Alexandria, my very own library city. Printing cannot begin without the Plantin Company, and your stores have been made exactly as you wished.”

“The stores and workshops have already been built...?”

“I used magic just the other day to construct a new castle and city. Do you remember the spell used to make Hasse’s monastery? Imagine that on a much larger scale. Philine—the map, if you would.”

My trusty scholar spread a detailed map of the city on the table and then distributed smaller maps of the stores and their surroundings. The Gutenbergs analyzed them closely.

“Your new homes and stores are here,” I said, indicating a spot on the larger map. “Your workshops are here, in the center of the lower city. So far, only these areas were remade with my entwickeln. As people still need to pack and move, we plan to reconstruct the rest piecemeal.”

Benno looked at the maps and schematics and muttered, “It hurts that Mark isn’t here...”

Milda and Jares, who had come in Mark’s stead, were busy speaking with Melchior’s group. They intended to stay in Ehrenfest, so they weren’t too concerned with the details of our move.

“Lady Rozemyne, do these new buildings have windows and doors?” Dimo asked.

“Exactly the kind of question I would expect from a carpenter. We have installed our own, but you are welcome to replace them if you wish.” Replacing all the doors and windows at once wouldn’t have been feasible, so we were largely reusing the city’s old ones. Only the more well-to-do were ordering their own.

“Benno, schedule that as my first job in Alexandria,” Dimo said. “It should give my workshop a chance to make a name for itself.”

“Benno, could you order the doorknobs, latches, and such from Johann?” Zack asked, also trying to take advantage of the opportunity. “You know he won’t disappoint.”

Out of all the Gutenbergs, the Plantin Company had the most money and the most experience setting up new stores. It made sense that everyone was consulting Benno, but he still scrunched up his face.

“Your first job is making more printing presses,” he said. “Can’t start the printing industry otherwise.”

“So we’re back to making letter types?” Johann asked, slumping his shoulders.

Benno exhaled and then folded up the schematics. “Lady Rozemyne, I am more interested in the schedule of our move than the layout of your new city. We were told when you planned to move to the Sovereignty that the industry would not begin until you came of age. Now that you are becoming an aub, I imagine that has changed.”

“N-Ngh... That is correct. We intend to start it sooner.”

I thought back to when I’d insisted that those involved with the printing industry wouldn’t need to move before my coming-of-age. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, Benno had been right in saying that plans involving me always ended up being rushed. His dark-red eyes practically screamed, “Told you so.”

“As an aub, I must develop my duchy’s industry. How soon can you be ready to move?”

The Gutenbergs had assumed they wouldn’t need to relocate anytime soon. They had it much harder than Benno’s lot, who had spent the past year preparing to move at a moment’s notice.

Johann met my eye while I was gazing around the room. “I planned to move with the Plantin Company from the start,” he said. I was reminded that the foreman’s granddaughter had turned him down and that he wanted to leave Ehrenfest as soon as he could.

“Heidi was motivated to begin with, and the Plantin Company instructed us to hurry up and prepare to move the moment we were asked to review our stores’ schematics,” Josef explained, smacking the sheet in question with his fingers. “So... yeah, I can technically make this work.”

I would never have guessed that checking schematics would induce so much panic.

The heck?! It's like Benno can see the future!

I stared at him in shock, only to receive a light glare in response. "This wasn't a prediction I wanted to come true," his eyes seemed to say. "But, well, here we are..." He was being so discreet only because there were other nobles present; otherwise, he would already have started grinding a fist against my head.

Sorry, but thanks! Your help is invaluable.

"However," Josef continued, "moving right away means Heidi won't be able to assist Horace with getting his credentials, leaving the workshop without a successor. She hopes to remedy this by letting him have one of the fruits of her research. May we have permission to spend money on this endeavor?"

I was already making an unreasonable request; if we could solve the problems I was causing my Gutenbergs by throwing money at them, then I would foot the bill without a second thought. Someone as passionate about research as Heidi would create new ink for Alexandria before we knew it. Compared to delaying the printing industry for two whole years, Josef's proposal was nothing.

"You may. I want you both to be fully ready to move."

"My thanks."

I turned to Dimo, silently requesting his thoughts.

"I'm married, but it shouldn't be a problem," he said. "I just need someone to hire me a carriage for our belongings; I won't be able to find one on such short notice."

Next, all eyes fell on Zack.

"It depends how ready my wife is," he began with a slight grimace. "I'm used to preparing for long trips without her, but moving all our things just sounds..."

"Yeah," Dimo said. "My wife and I live with our family, so we can just leave the house to them once our stuff's packed, but that's not true for everyone."

Josef and Heidi were somewhat unusual, since they went on their work trips together. Heidi, in particular, was especially eager to move. Zack's wife was more normal and would probably think the change was much too sudden.

"If you think she might take issue, then you are welcome to stay here for the time being," I said. "Our original plan was for you to wait until my coming-of-age."

"Hmm... We're setting up somewhere new, so I really should be there from the start."

Zack continued to muse while I turned to Benno and said, "Lutz of the Plantin Company can also delay his move."

"Why's that?" Benno asked.

"As I recall, his coming-of-age ceremony is right around the corner. His parents must be looking forward to celebrating with him, so I would not oppose him staying here until its conclusion." For all their communication issues, Lutz's family was very close. He was only a season away from becoming an adult, so letting him stay in Ehrenfest a little while longer was fine with me.

"Zack raised a good point, though. As someone due to start working in a new area, Lutz will also want to be in Alexandria from the beginning. I will pass your message on to him, but I suspect he will prioritize moving over celebrating with his family."

Our smith was still deep in thought when Johann gave him a slap on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Go at your wife's pace. I'll manage the workshop on my own, somehow." They were going to be in the same workshop when they moved, so he wanted to help Zack as much as he could.

Not that Zack seemed to appreciate it.

"Come on. You know that's not happening."

Zack's rough response made the entire room fall silent. I tried to smooth things over by focusing on the schedule.

"We intend to start by setting up a printing workshop in the temple. It won't be too different from what Johann had to do on his trips, so he really should be able to manage on his own."

"Yeah, exactly!" Johann exclaimed. "I can manage—"

"Don't get cocky," Zack snapped, a harsh glint in his gray eyes. "Teaching smiths to make letter types is nothing like starting a new workshop from scratch. I plan to have my wife do all the paperwork. D'you really think you could manage the finances on your own? You know enough math to make your schematics, but you make all sorts of mistakes when summing the cost of the materials."

"Th-That's..."

"In a brand-new city where you have no connections, how do you expect to draw in customers? Your first jobs there are registering the types, pumps, and such with the Smithing Guild and then moving on to the Merchant's Guild, right?"

"Ngh... Alright, never mind."

Johann hung his head, his protests torn to shreds. Far from a jack-of-all-trades, he was at his best when he was silently working in the smithy.

"I appreciate the thought," Zack said. "I just don't want the workshop to go under as soon as it opens." He sighed, then stood up straight and looked at me. "Lady Rozemyne, I would rather move with the Plantin Company. My wife might complain a little, but we can make it work."

In short, the Gutenbergs would all do their best to move with me. I exhaled, relieved, and glanced at Benno. How was I going to make my next request without earning his ire?

Benno pretended not to notice me at first but eventually conceded and smiled. "Yes, Lady Rozemyne? Is there something else?"

Ngh... He's asking whether I seriously intend to give them more work. And, well... I do.

"My sincerest apologies, but... could you bring those from the temple with you when you move?"

Benno's face twisted in a grimace. For him to have made such a bitter expression in the presence of other nobles, my request must have been truly unreasonable.

"We have decided to move Fran and several others to Alexandria's temple, but they know little of the outside world," I explained. "I cannot send them on the journey alone. Of course, I will cover the necessary costs for their travel."

"My concerns are not financial," Benno replied at length. "I simply doubt I can procure enough boats and carriages. On a long-distance trip such as ours, taking food, clothes, and other goods into account, we will need a carriage or two for each person."

I thought back to when we'd used carriages for Spring Prayer, counted the number of people who had traveled with us on my fingers... and sighed. We really would need a lot of carriages, especially when everyone was transporting their furniture and work tools on top of everything else. They wouldn't even have designated places to rest along the way, as was usually the case for those performing Spring Prayer.

To complicate matters further, Benno's caravan would include women and children, and their slower speed would make them more vulnerable to bandit attacks. We could improve their security by hiring more guards, but where would we find them, and how many would be enough? Not to mention, those guards would need to bring supplies, leaving the party with even more luggage to account for.

"Could you not take them in your highbeast as you did with the Gutenbergs for our long-distance trips?" Benno asked.

"Unfortunately not. My schedule is going to be full until the new duchy has settled down to some degree, and returning to Ehrenfest will prove much harder for me after the Archduke Conference." Still, I was the one forcing him to change his plans again; the least I could do was try to propose a solution. "Would you be able to take them if we reduced your luggage to the bare minimum?"

"Care to elaborate?"

"My belongings are being moved to Alexandria via teleporters connected to the Royal Academy's dormitories. We could transport your luggage with mine and store it inside the castle for when you arrive."

Furniture, work tools, out-of-season clothes—much of what Benno's party intended to bring wouldn't be of any use to them during the trip. Teleporting those goods would mean they could travel with far fewer carriages.

Benno didn't even have a chance to reply before the other Gutenbergs started chiming in.

"That sounds tremendously helpful," Josef said. "We have lots of materials and tools for making ink, and I just know Heidi will want to grab more materials on the way."

I saw the sparkles in Dimo's and Zack's eyes as they turned to each other.

"Won't this let us bring tools we were about to give up on?"

"If we teleport one of the presses, we can start printing as soon as we arrive."

"And some pumps. We need them for our new wells."

I didn't mind them taking this opportunity to make their lives easier, but our main goal was to reduce the size of their caravan.

"We can only use the teleporters until the Archduke Conference, so make your preparations as quickly as you can," I said. "It should give you more carriage space, no? Enough for Fran and the others?"

Benno shut his eyes, no doubt performing various calculations in his head. "I would propose that we travel to Leisegang by boat, then to Kannawitz by carriage, and then to the city of Alexandria by boat again. I would appreciate carriages and guards for when we arrive in Leisegang."

According to Benno, boats would save more time than attempting the entire journey by carriage. Kannawitz was one of the provinces I'd showered with my divine power, earning me the fishermen's gratitude, so I didn't foresee any issues there.

But guards, hm...?

I considered asking Leisegang for soldiers or anyone else they could spare to guard the Gutenbergs. Had we discussed the matter earlier, Leonore might have been able to broach the subject for us, but she had already spoken with her family and set out on her return trip to Ehrenfest. We also had to consider who would take over as the caravan's escort when they crossed the border into Alexandria—not that any one came to mind.

"Um, Lady Rozemyne..." Judithe said out of nowhere. "Damuel and I will guard them."

"Come again? Is that really acceptable?" I was surprised to hear nobles volunteer to guard commoners.

"Oh...? Did you not hear? Lady Charlotte requested it."

"Charlotte did...?"

She had apparently said, "Nothing can be allowed to happen to my sister's Gutenbergs while they are traveling through Ehrenfest." Everyone feared I would charge to their rescue as I'd done with Ferdinand, causing an interduchy incident in the process.

My lower-city family is traveling with them, so... Yeah, I most certainly would.

"We were told to escort them to the border gate—and then to Alexandria's castle, if possible," Judithe explained. "We were chosen because Lady Charlotte thought we were more likely than anyone else to receive your permission to enter Alexandria. I will cease to be your guard knight after your inauguration, so I was hoping to make the entire journey."

Judithe's violet eyes were brimming with hope. She must have really wanted to take a work trip to another duchy—as expected, since she hadn't been allowed to attend my engagement ceremony.

"I would very much appreciate that," I said. Having knights with magic tools protect the caravan would scare away bandits and allow for much easier communication. "I grant you my permission, but your age means you must also ask your father before you can venture into another duchy."

"Not this again!"

"I wish to allow you this final duty... but it depends on your father's decision."

As for Damuel, I'll get the permission he needs from Grandfather.

I returned my attention to Benno. "As I made such an unreasonable demand of you, allow me to arrange the boats, carriages, and guards. You may take these—proof that you are my personnel and documents that will grant you access to Alexandria. They should make things a little easier for you."

Benno received the documents with a satisfied grin. "We shall move at once, as per your wishes.” He tapped a finger against the large map on the table, the flame of ambition burning brightly in his eyes, and said, “Can I assume this library city of yours will spread printing throughout the entire country?”

I recognized the look on his face and cackled. “Indeed. I aim to spread books throughout Yurgenschmidt and gather copies of them all within my library. Start your move as soon as you can, and together we will make that dream a reality.”

Our meeting ended with a promise to meet again in Alexandria.

Inauguration Attire and Closing the Library

“Milady? Milady!”

I was so deeply immersed in my textbook that I nearly leapt out of my skin when Rihyarda snatched it away from me. She must have been calling my name for a while because she shook her head and sighed.

“It is almost time to depart for the main building—Lady Florencia’s and Lady Charlotte’s seamstresses are due to arrive soon. You will need to pick the clothes and ornaments you wish to wear for your inauguration ceremony.”

“Can I not just reuse what I wore for my engagement ceremony?” I asked. “It is the color of the season, and since it was made for my adoption by the king, it must be appropriate for an inauguration ceremony.” I was also emotionally attached to the outfit, which included cloth dyed by Mom, cloth given to me by Ferdinand, and a hairpin made by Tuuli.

Rihyarda and Ottilie both frowned.

“You have worn it twice in public already—during lunch with the royal family and your engagement ceremony—and Aub Ehrenfest would surely feel slighted if you turned away the seamstresses Lady Florencia and Lady Charlotte were nice enough to summon for you,” Rihyarda explained. “The Archduke Conference spans several days; there will be plenty more chances for you to wear your favorite outfits.”

I needed to wear clothes from Ehrenfest; otherwise, the nobles of Old Ahrensbach would mock Sylvester for not looking out for his daughter about to become an aub. Many of them already opposed the thought of me taking over, so the last thing we wanted to do was create a weakness for them to exploit.

“Very well. Let us depart.”

“We received quite the selection, Sister. Mother is trying hers on as we speak.”

Charlotte was awaiting us in a room full of clothes. Florencia's and her outfits had already been brought in, and we drank tea while they were laid out for us. Florencia was behind a screen.

"Charlotte," I said, "Judithe told me you arranged for her and Damuel to escort the Gutenbergs on their move. I thank you ever so much. Because of you, I was able to entrust them with the task without anyone complaining about knights guarding commoners."

Judithe had spoken with her father and, as expected, failed to secure his approval to leave the duchy. She was upset about going only as far as the border gate, but Ehrenfest's consideration meant I could send my knights from Alexandria as well. Matthias and Laurenz would meet them at the gate.

"I am glad to have been of use to you, Sister. Not to bluntly request something in return, but might I ask you to instruct Judithe and Damuel to check the south of the duchy when they arrive at the border gate?"

"Check it for what, exactly?" I doubted Charlotte had anything dubious in mind, but as I was leaving Ehrenfest, I didn't want to approve anything that might put them at risk.

"Any lingering damage from the battle in Gerlach. I insisted on going during Spring Prayer, but not even returning the stolen mana fully restored the land to normal."

Simply using the chalice expended mana, so a decent chunk of the stolen mana had unfortunately been lost. Greenery had returned to the province, restoring it from a barren wasteland incapable of supporting crops, but they still couldn't predict how its harvest would go.

She continued, "I wish to know whether the Spring Prayer I performed was enough to heal the land, whether it needs more mana, or whether we should devote ourselves to preparing more food for winter. Giebe Gerlach's estate was attacked directly, so our communication with the province is less than ideal."

A new giebe would normally be assigned after the Archduke Conference, but all the deaths in Gerlach might have complicated the handover. If the province needed assistance, then it was crucial that we find out sooner rather than later.

Is it just me, or is my little sister way too amazing? She didn't even witness the battle, yet she's thinking about the aftermath and supporting those who need it.

I was moved to know she was being so considerate of her people and protecting the Gutenbergs while Ehrenfest's adults were focused on the Archduke Conference.

"Judithe—you heard all of that, I presume. Check on Illgner and Gerlach at the end of your trip."

She agreed to my request, a slight smile on her face.

"You are next, Rozemyne," Florencia said as she came out from behind the screen. "Your everyday clothes can come later; first, consider what you will wear for the Archduke Conference."

Right on cue, the seamstresses brought my clothes into the room. There were so many outfits, some brand-new and others simply altered. Each garment was dyed and embroidered in the style of its respective workshop, meaning I could mostly tell which ones had come from Florencia's seamstresses and which ones had come from Charlotte's.

"Let us start with this outfit," one of the seamstresses said. "We might need to make a few more adjustments."

I went behind the screen and started putting my arms through the sleeves. A proper fitting hadn't been an option for me, so I'd asked the seamstresses to base my new garments on already fitted clothes from the Gilberta Company. It must have been quite an ordeal for them.

"How very impressive," I said. "It barely needs any alterations at all."

The seamstresses broke into smiles and got to work, noting that the last changes were the most important. I was bound to have a lot of eyes on me during the Archduke Conference, so every last detail needed to be perfect.

Several outfits later, I elected to take a break. Charlotte went behind the screen in my stead. Rihyarda poured me some tea, which I drank while looking over the finished clothing.

"Would it not be strange for me to wear blue during a conference held at the end of spring?” I asked Florencia.

“Not at all, for it is the divine color of your birth season. Did any of the outfits take your fancy?”

I gestured to one her seamstresses had prepared—a mix of aqua and navy blue. “May I wear this for the inauguration ceremony? It might bear too close a resemblance to your outfit, but...”

Florencia’s clothes for the ceremony were a calm green. Their design wasn’t identical to that of the clothes I’d chosen, but the two outfits still closely resembled each other, no doubt because they had come from the same seamstresses.

“True, both use cloth dyed by a Renaissance, and their pattern is the same, but the colors are enough to distinguish them. That contest was not only for selecting our personal dyers but also for making patterns unique to an individual.”

Trends among noblewomen had changed quite a bit in my absence.

“Since you went to all this trouble, I think we should wear matching clothes for my inauguration,” I said. “How does that sound to you? It should emphasize that I am on good terms with Ehrenfest.”

Florencia gave me a bright, warm smile. “Yours are predominantly aqua, so they should pair nicely with your Alexandrian cape. Let us take this opportunity to match sashes as well. Maxine, do you recall those differently colored sashes I asked for? Bring them to me, if you would.”

Florencia then told another of her retainers to inform Sylvester’s attendants of our plan.

“You’re telling Sylvester?” I asked.

“Indeed. We will attend together, so some sense of unity is preferable. You would do well to inform Lord Ferdinand, seeing as your capes will not match.”

Eglantine would grant me the cape of my new duchy during the inauguration, but Ferdinand would continue to wear his Ehrenfest cape. In that regard, we were bound to be a little mismatched. I elected to write him a letter describing my clothes so he could wear something to go with them.

“Rozemyne, how would you feel about Brunhilde’s outfit matching ours?” Florencia asked. It wouldn’t match perfectly because there wasn’t enough time to make one from scratch, but a similar design and variant sash would at least give the impression from a distance. “I will respect your opinion, but I think we should give her a visible connection to you so that other nobles know of your bond.”

“I welcome the idea, of course.”

Florencia informed me that she and Brunhilde had worn similar but differently colored hairpins during the Royal Academy’s graduation ceremony. Perhaps because I wasn’t from this world, I still didn’t really understand the concept of second or third wives. It was more common for first and second wives to oppose each other than be friends—hence concerns that Brunhilde, a Leisegang noble, would cause discord within the archducal family—but I was glad to see Florencia buck the trend.

“As this might be our very last chance...” Florencia held out a sound-blocker. “Would you allow me a moment of your time?”

I glimpsed the small object in her hand and immediately began to shiver. My heart pounded in my chest, and a cold sweat ran down my back.

“Is something the matter?” Florencia asked, tilting her head at me. Ferdinand and my retainers must have hidden the truth so well that not even she knew about my feystone phobia.

“Oh, no,” I replied, accepting the sound-blocker with a forced smile. Having to feel it in my hand made me tremble even more, but I couldn’t let my fear show; I would need to hold any number of magic tools and feystones during the Archduke Conference.

“Even as your departure for another duchy draws near, you agree to wear matching clothes and respect Charlotte’s every wish. I always thought it, but I am more certain now than ever—you truly are a saint.”

I was so taken aback that my mouth hung open and I forgot all about the feystone. For her to have said something so kind when I’d caused Ehrenfest nothing but trouble...

“Our relationship has been... not strained, but not at all what one would expect of a mother and daughter,” Florencia said with a sad smile. “You have always been closer to your true mother, Elvira. And with Lord Ferdinand in charge of your education, I never knew whether it was acceptable to reach out to you.”

My upbringing meant I’d needed to study twice as hard to get accustomed to the ways of noble society. My meetings with other nobles had been heavily restricted, and I’d spent more time in the temple than in the castle. I’d also disregarded noble scholars and prioritized the commoners developing the printing industry. Florencia had tried to properly educate me as a first wife when I was engaged to Wilfried, but I’d always refused on the grounds that I was much too busy. She hadn’t known what to do with me as I’d charged ahead down my own path.

“I admit,” she said, “your reluctance to stay in the castle and tendency to avoid my education made me wonder if you hated me.”

“That was never my intention...” I still considered the restrictions of noble society unpleasant, and tea parties were always a bother, but I’d never hated or even disliked Florencia.

“I realize now that we did not have the same future in mind—that was all there was to it,” Florencia continued, her expression betraying her melancholy. “It is unfortunate that our time together in Ehrenfest’s archducal family must end, but I am more grateful to you than I can ever put into words. You protected my children and devoted so much to the development of our duchy.”

“I am grateful to you as well, for you let me do as I pleased when others would not.”

Sylvester wasn’t the only one with exceptional patience—Florencia had striven to grant my wishes and clean up my messes no matter how many times I put her through the wringer. She had warned me about socializing and my education and taken me aside to give me advice, but at no point had she ever forced me into something I didn’t want to do.

“I presume you will continue to live as you see fit,” Florencia said. “Even so, I must remind you of your sickly constitution and the importance of looking after your health.”

I couldn’t suppress a smile.

“Rozemyne?”

“I was just thinking how wonderful it is that mothers always give their daughters the same advice... We might be taking separate roads, but you are and will always be dear to me. Do take care as well... Mother.”

Charlotte returned just as things were getting emotional. Florencia and I put our sound-blockers down on the table.

“Having a secret conversation, were you?” Charlotte asked, raising an eyebrow at us.

“I simply asked Rozemyne to continue being close with you even once she becomes an aub.”

“You are my darling little sister, Charlotte—that will not change no matter where I go.”

I exchanged a quick look and a smile with Florencia. It was only brief, but I was glad to have spoken privately with her.

“Milady, your schedule for today includes closing the library,” Rihyarda said once I’d eaten breakfast. “Carriages and servants have already been prepared. Shall we contact Alexandria?”

Lasfam had sent word that he’d completed the tasks given to him, so Rihyarda had made the necessary arrangements for the rest of my estate-turned-library to be cleared out. Some of the luggage belonged to Ferdinand, so his retainers on Alexandria’s side would need to be ready to receive it.

“Damuel, how were things over there?” I asked.

“I met with Lord Justus yesterday. Lord Sergius will meet us in the Alexandria Dormitory this afternoon.”

Damuel and Philine were going to Alexandria daily to help find more evidence of corrupt nobles’ embezzlement and other such crimes. In the process, they were also serving as a valuable line of communication. It was through them that we'd come to learn Roderick was already living in the new duchy—he had rushed through an exceptionally busy move at Hartmut's, uh... *prompting*.

"Lady Rozemyne, will you require my assistance today?" Philine asked.

"No, I would rather you stay with Damuel and continue helping Ferdinand. Almost everything is packed, and my attendants can make sure the luggage is taken care of."

"Yes, my lady. We shall depart, then."

The pair turned to leave, but Ottilie stopped them. "My apologies, Damuel, Philine, but could you deliver a message to Hartmut for me? Let him know that unless he returns soon, we will not be able to proceed with his move."

Clarissa could do most of the packing, but Hartmut needed to be present to clear out his hidden room and such. Ottilie usually left him to his own devices, so she really must have been at the end of her rope.

"Angelica, how fares Lieseleta?" I asked. "Have you made much progress with packing?" Gretia had only needed to focus on her own move, meaning she had already returned to work, but Lieseleta was stuck doing two people's preparations.

Angelica thought for a moment, then gazed at me quizzically. "I think she said she would finish before the Archduke Conference."

"I already knew that much."

Damuel and Philine returned to Alexandria, while I went to my library with my attendants and guard knights.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

"Lasfam, I am glad to hear you have completed your duties," I said, remembering everything he had needed to do. I thought Ferdinand was cruel to make him memorize so many documents before he could move, but Lasfam had accomplished it without issue.

"It has been quite a while since I was last pushed to my limits," he replied. "I grew so complacent while away from my lord that it was nice to warm up my mind a little before the move."

He sounds a little too used to being worked to the bone... but what else can you expect from one of Ferdinand's retainers?

The very thought of that thick stack of documents being a mere warm-up made my heart ache. As one might expect, you really had to be on top of your game to survive serving Ferdinand.

"Is the luggage ready to be taken outside?" I asked.

"Yes. Only the library and your chambers remain to be cleared out. You will not be taking the furniture that was here when you received the estate, so there was not much to pack overall."

Aside from my chambers, I'd only really used the library, brewing room, and parlor since accepting this estate. I'd yet to even enter most other rooms—and now I wouldn't need to, as Lasfam had cleared them out for me.

"In that case, should my attendants start packing up the library?" I asked. "I will clear out my hidden room in the meantime. Angelica, fetch me a box, if you will."

I got straight to work, storing letters from Ferdinand, the sound-recording magic tool, and several other things in the box Angelica gave me. My hidden room was relatively empty in the first place, so the process didn't take me long. I returned to the others when I was done, set down my things, and then led some of my helpers into the hidden room to carry out the chair and such. It was clear in no time.

"Oh, Lady Rozemyne," Lasfam said. "Have you finished already?"

"I did not have much to pack," I replied, then noticed the boxes of books being carried to the entrance hall. "It saddens me to see the library so empty. Only a little, though, for its former contents are being moved to my new duchy."

He nodded and gestured me to a seat. "Please wait here until the luggage has been moved."

"I have a sentimental attachment to this place—it was my very first library—

but the circumstances under which I received it bring me great sorrow," I mused aloud, taking in these surroundings for the last time. "I always knew I could never truly be happy here."

Lasfam looked around as well, wearing a morose smile. "This was not a place of pleasant memories for Lord Ferdinand—or for me, for that matter. Though I managed this estate as his retainer, he seldom ever came here."

Archduke candidates tended to leave the northern building after coming of age. Those who were engaged stayed there until they were married, and those who intended to remain in their duchy were given an estate in the Noble's Quarter. It took roughly two years to move in to the northern building, and the same was true of moving out.

"It was the beginning of summer when my lord received this estate from the previous archduke," Lasfam explained. "He had just finished his fourth year at the Academy—though in those days, he stayed there year-round."

The estate had already been furnished, and Ferdinand had said there was nothing for him to prepare, so he had stayed at the Royal Academy to focus on his research.

"Later, when the previous archduke fell sick, Lord Ferdinand was ordered to spend more time with the Knight's Order. Only then did he frequent this estate, for he was safer here than in the northern building."

Eckhart and Justus had also spent more time here, determined to stick by their lord. Karstedt and Sylvester had visited on a regular basis.

"More time with the Knight's Order?" I repeated. "I remember hearing that he used to be the knight commander."

"You knew? That was after his proposed marriage into Dunkelfelger was dropped in favor of Lady Magdalena's engagement with Lord Trauerqual. The previous archduke had wished for Lord Ferdinand to live similarly to Lord Bonifatius, hoping Lady Veronica would permit my lord to stay in Ehrenfest and support Sylvester. Lord Karstedt agreed and started treating Lord Ferdinand as the knight commander."

Sylvester had also agreed, so Karstedt, who had already been the knight commander by that point, had started doing what he could to prop up Ferdinand.

“Looking back on it all, the previous archduke likely strove to create a place for Lord Ferdinand that would remain even after his own demise. My lord was displeased with having to spend so much time in the Knight’s Order, for it meant he had less to devote to his research.”

As the late archduke’s health deteriorated, Veronica’s attacks became more severe. Ferdinand hadn’t been able to spend as much time in the Royal Academy due to being treated as a knight commander rather than an archduke candidate, so he had started to feel more and more trapped.

“At last, when the previous archduke passed on, Lady Veronica ceased disguising her murderous intent,” Lasfam explained. “My lord entered the temple at Lord Sylvester’s advice, costing him his place in noble society.”

“Sylvester was only trying to protect him, and—”

“I was told the same—that he simply wished to keep my lord safe from Lady Veronica. But if that were true, would it not have made more sense to send the crazed widow rendered insane by the death of her husband to the temple?”

I get how you feel, but that’s so harsh! No wonder you’re on good terms with Eckhart.

“For a while, Lord Ferdinand commuted to the temple from this estate, but he spent more and more time there as the days went on. Eventually, he came here only when he had business in the castle or Noble’s Quarter. I actually came to envy his temple attendants; I was unable to serve my lord no matter how passionately I wished to.”

I noticed a slight smile on Lasfam’s face as he continued, “Eckhart, Justus, and I had a celebratory drink when Lady Veronica was detained. Most others were busy in the aftermath, but our wrath for the woman was so profound that the knight commander ordered us to stay far away from her. It was a shame, really. Had she been detained somewhere other than the Ivory Tower, I could have enacted revenge on her in all manner of creative fashions.”

His last remark was so shocking that I could only stare at him in response.

Despite his peaceful smile, Lasfam was no less devoted than Ferdinand's other name-sworn.

Father, you were wise to keep him away from Veronica. He's out for revenge and violent as heck!

"We had relatively little to do, but Lord Ferdinand was always between the temple, the castle, and Lord Karstedt's estate," Lasfam noted, shooting me a knowing look. That must have been when I was studying like crazy to prepare for my baptism ceremony. "As a result of your adoption by the archduke, my lord sent Eckhart and Justus to the estate on a more regular basis. He, too, spent time here upon his return to noble society. I was overjoyed to be of use to him."

But then Ferdinand was sent to Ahrensbach, where he was poisoned and almost died. Lasfam had spent the entire time stuck in Ehrenfest.

Listening to Lasfam made it clear how much he, Eckhart, and Justus loathed Detlinde and the Lanzenavians for endangering their lord. I was terribly worried about what revenge plots they might try to execute in the shadows of Alexandria.

Praise be to Mestionora for banning the taking of any more lives!

Her order would prevent the absolute worst from happening.

"I was ordered to serve you, Lady Rozemyne—at least on a temporary basis. But you, like my lord, were barely ever here. You spent your winters at the Royal Academy and the rest of your time moving between the castle and temple."

In truth, I would rather have stayed in my library, but the situation hadn't allowed me to. It was tragic how little time I'd actually spent here.

"Still, I thoroughly enjoyed getting to watch you and your retainers," Lasfam said. "Your reports kept me well-informed about Lord Ferdinand, and it was precisely because of this estate that he was saved."

Indeed, before rescuing Ferdinand, we had used the estate to brew the tools and rejuvenation potions we needed. Eckhart and Justus had rested in the meantime. Had we attempted the same thing in the castle, nobles would surely have interrupted us and complained about the operation.

"Lady Rozemyne, you have saved my lord in more ways than I can count. I am glad he is engaged to you and that his future is in Alexandria, not Ahrensbach; it means my waiting here the past year and a half was worth it. I put him in your care."

A smile creased Lasfam's green eyes. I was touched to know that he trusted me, but I also felt a sudden wave of pressure. As much as I wanted to give Ferdinand a joyous life, I felt that I was rarely successful.

"It is my every intention to treat Ferdinand well," I said. "However... you might have been in this estate too long to know, but I cause him trouble more often than not. I always have. Please do not be mad when you see how we interact in Alexandria and the burdens he must endure because of me."

Lasfam attempted not to chuckle, but it was no use. "I can make no promises, but... Ahahaha!" He burst into laughter for reasons I couldn't understand.

As I retraced our conversation thus far, a single thought came to mind: if ever I angered Lasfam or one of Ferdinand's other retainers, I would immediately hole up in the Ivory Tower. It was the only way to escape their revenge.

"Is that everything?" asked one of the servants. They must have finished moving the luggage. "If so, we shall depart."

Lasfam looked around and nodded. "Take the luggage in the front carriages to the castle's teleportation circle and the red paper in the back carriage to the northern building. Now then, everyone—please step outside. It is time to seal the estate."

The servants took their leave first, with Ottilie's group right behind them.

I paused in the entrance hall. It didn't feel empty with all the furniture still there, but the absence of everything that mattered to us made me feel as though I'd wandered into someone else's estate. This was no longer my home—it would remain unused until it received its next master.

"Could you lock the door?" Lasfam asked me.

I took out the key I always kept with me and did as he'd requested. It wasn't remotely nice having to seal the first library I’d ever obtained. I stood in place and stared at the door, overcome with longing and regret, but Lasfam just seemed glad to be free of this place.

“This key is for attendants,” he said, not seeming the least bit emotional as he gave me his key to the estate that had served as his home all these years. “Please return it to Aub Ehrenfest alongside your own.”

Lasfam was more sprightly than ever now that he was going back to serving Ferdinand. I even noticed a spring in his step as he marched on ahead and called, “Lady Rozemyne, I wish to travel to Alexandria ahead of schedule and place these books in the library there.”

“Don’t even think about it!” I exclaimed, whipping around and jumping into the carriage after him. “That joy is mine to have!”

Farewell, Ehrenfest

No sooner had my retainers moved to Alexandria than Ehrenfest nobles started going in and out of the dormitory to prepare for the Archduke Conference. To minimize the problems this would cause, Sylvester had instructed me that morning to stay in the dormitory instead of the castle until my inauguration.

“Are you ready to depart, milady?” Rihyarda asked. “The dormitory should contain everything you need to live there.”

“I am, but this feels so sudden... Though I understand it will only be for two days, I apologize for burdening everyone with this change of schedule.”

As it stood, my active retinue comprised only Judithe and Angelica as my knights and Rihyarda, Bertilde, and Ottilie as my attendants. Lieseleta and Gretia had gone to the Ehrenfest Dormitory ahead of us to clean my chambers and move in some of my belongings, while Leonore was guarding them. Everyone else was in Alexandria preparing for the Archduke Conference. I’d sent word to them that our plans had abruptly changed; I wondered whether my correspondence had reached them by now.

“You need not apologize,” Ottilie said. “As Lord Sylvester and Lady Charlotte informed you, there are many among the nobles presently at the dormitory who are unaware of your circumstances. Interduchy disputes might arise if you do not keep an eye on their movements.”

My attendants from Old Ahrensbach were exchanging intelligence and paperwork with my other retainers; there were more administrative documents from Alexandria that needed my approval. They were only using Ehrenfest’s tea party room, but the frequency of their visits risked displeasing Ehrenfest’s nobles, and even a small clash could spiral into a larger conflict. I was being told to remain vigilant so that my retainers wouldn’t become the source of trouble between our duchies.

Charlotte went out of her way to teach me a lot, so...

She had told me how Ehrenfest viewed Old Ahrensbach's nobles and what I, the shining star of the Leisegangs, needed to do in becoming the aub of another duchy. Moreover, she pointed out that Leisegang had provided important food support during and ever since the Defense of Ehrenfest.

As the old proverb goes, it's an ill bird that fouls its own nest.

I sent a letter to Alexandria describing the current situation and subsequently forbidding my violet-caped retainers from entering Ehrenfest's tea party room. We urgently needed to explain our circumstances to the Ehrenfest nobles.

"Bertilde, is there anything we need for the inauguration ceremony that we do not have?" Rihyarda asked.

"I double-checked, and there is nothing we are missing."

"Ottilie, take these to the dormitory as well, if you would. We shall return them here when we are done with them."

"Understood."

My room in the castle was fully cleared out under Rihyarda's supervision. Now we just needed to ask the servants to move my belongings. Anything I might need in advance of the Archduke Conference would be taken to my room in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, where Gretia and Lieseleta were awaiting us, while everything else would go to either Alexandria's dormitory or its castle.

"All that remains is to seal your hidden room, milady. Are you certain there is nothing left inside?"

I performed one last check. As expected, no furniture or anything else remained. I pressed a hand against the door and channeled my mana into it, blasting the room out of existence.

"How shall we proceed, milady? Lord Wilfried's retainers have asked to know when you are departing, but should we inform Lord Bonifatius as well? Considering the fuss he kicked up at your engagement ceremony, Lord Sylvester said to prioritize your wishes."

I thought back to Bonifatius stomping his feet in anger as Ferdinand wiped the tears from my eyes, and my lips curled into a smile. "My engagement was set in stone by a royal decree—it cannot be overturned no matter how strongly Grandfather feels about it."

"I would understand the bride's father being upset, but for Lord Bonifatius, not Lord Karstedt, to be the source of your troubles... Good grief. He really must show some decency, no matter how strong his love for you might be."

Rihyarda's comments were merciless, maybe because she had so much history with Bonifatius. I listened to her complaints with a smile, then said that we should give him the time of my departure.

"He might be a little much, but I do not particularly mind it," I said. "I wish to at least give him a proper farewell. I owe him for looking after Damuel, and we will not have anywhere near as many chances to meet when I am Aub Alexandria."

"Understood. I shall ask him to meet us in the teleportation hall."

Rihyarda sent ordonnanzes to Wilfried and Bonifatius, then gave me a solemn look. "Now then, milady... my duty ends here. Lieseleta and Gretia have finished moving, and you can count on Bertilde and Ottilie to attend you at the Academy. Even in my absence, you should reach your inauguration without issue."

It was easy to forget, but Rihyarda was Sylvester's attendant, not mine; she had only served me since my return to Ehrenfest because my retainers were absent or busy with their moves. During the Archduke Conference, she would need to focus on her own work here in the castle, so she couldn't accompany me to the Academy.

"It might only have been to fill a gap in my retinue, but I truly am glad we had this time together," I said. "You even accepted my selfish request and called me 'milady' till the very end. Despite my overwhelming ignorance, you have taught me how to be a noble ever since my arrival at this castle."

Rihyarda had guided me when my upbringing made me unused to noble customs, scolded Ferdinand when he was too harsh in educating me, allowed me to leave the castle when I missed the temple, and even followed me to the Royal Academy. She had played a crucial role in keeping me afloat as an Ehrenfest noble.

“If not for your loving lectures, I would never have reached the standards expected of a noble,” I said. “From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.”

“Oh, no, the gratitude is mine. If not for you, the tangled thread of fate would never have come undone.” A chain of misery had started with Gabriele, ensnaring Veronica, Georgine, Sylvester, and even Detlinde. Rihyarda had watched it grow and snarl for most of her life.

“To say I undid those knots is far too generous. I gracelessly sliced through them.”

“And the frayed ends are clear to see. That does not change your saving Lord Ferdinand, Justus, and so many others. Ehrenfest might never have survived without your intervention, but now we can find prosperity with our new neighbor.”

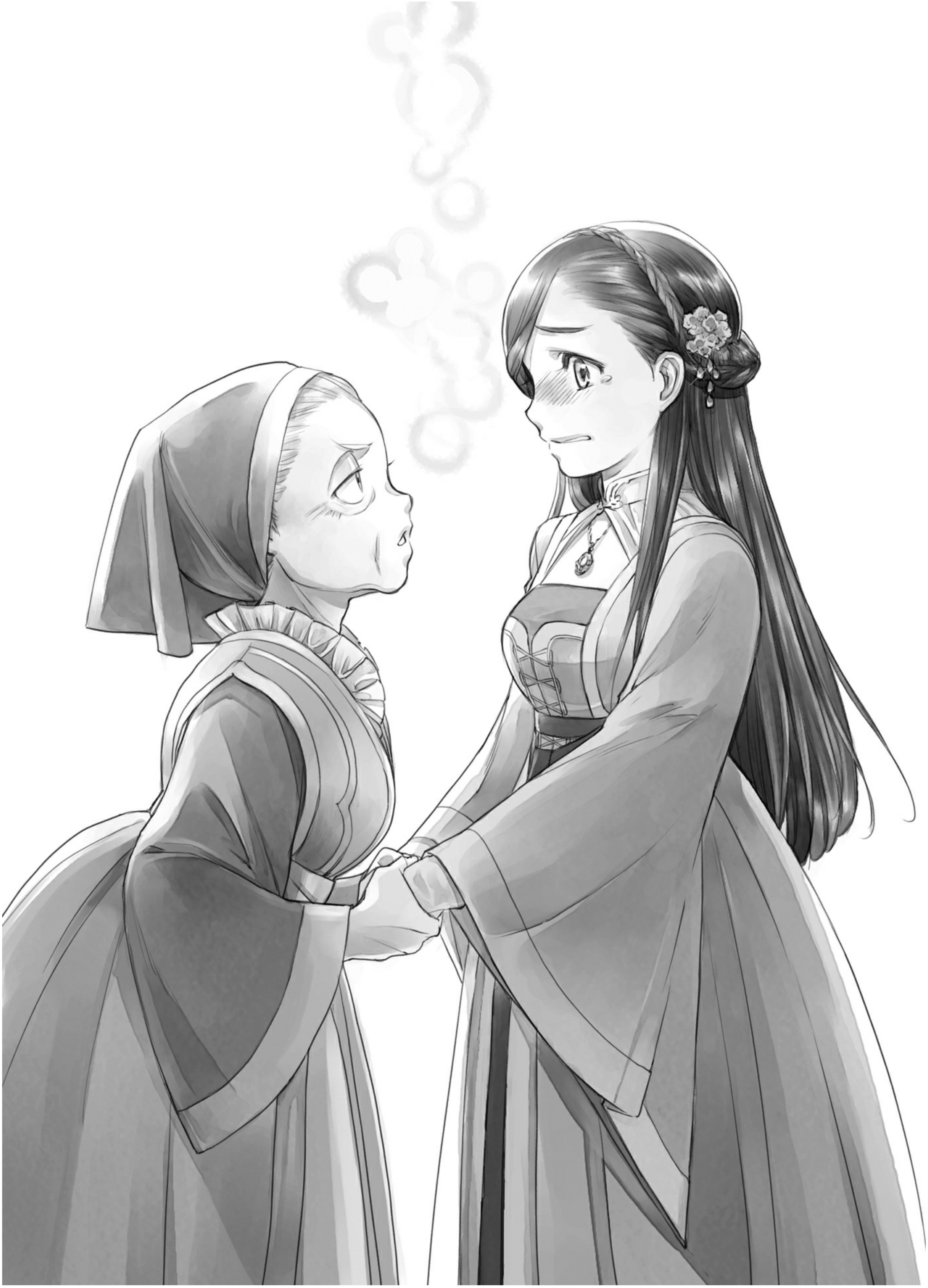
I exchanged a smile with Rihyarda, nodded, and said, “I will do my best. I do hope you will come to visit me in Alexandria when our situation improves.” If our duchies worked together and strove for mutual progress, interduchy travel would soon become simple.

“But of course. Please grant me the opportunity while I am still alive.”

Rihyarda spoke so casually, but her words reminded me just how hard it was going to be for us to meet again. Tears started to flow down my cheeks.

“You mustn’t cry, milady. Becoming an aub means being treated as an adult. Showing emotion or weakness will negatively impact your entire duchy. You must get a grip.”

I cried even harder. I wanted to keep relying on her, but this was the last lecture she would ever give me. Once I was an aub, no one would scold me like she did.



“Though I worry about you leaving the nest at such a young age,” Rihyarda continued, “you have Lord Ferdinand, Justus, and many others in Alexandria to support you. Not to mention, I much prefer this to the old plan to send you to the Sovereignty.”

I could see the cracks in Rihyarda’s smile. She took a deep breath, trying to keep the tears in her eyes from breaking free, then crossed her arms over her chest and knelt before me.

“Lady Rozemyne, the time has come for you to tread a new path. May I pray for Jugereise the Goddess of Separation to bless your road ahead and the start of your journey?”

“You may.”

“O Jugereise the Goddess of Separation... please protect my lady on her departure.”

I recognized the prayer as a farewell spoken by retainers when their lord or lady departed the castle. Not even sparing a moment to wipe my eyes, I watched intently as a red light floated up from Rihyarda’s ring.

By the time she stood again, her smile was gone. In its place was a much sterner expression—a silent declaration that I should dry my tears, quash my weakness, and march ahead without so much as turning back. I nodded and wiped my eyes, then took a deep breath and straightened my back.

Rihyarda led me to the door, which Judithe and Angelica had opened wide for me. She stopped when she reached it and moved aside, allowing me to pass straight through without even slowing down.

“Let us go,” I said.

Together with Ottilie, Bertilde, Judithe, and Angelica, I took my leave. I proceeded down the hallway without looking back, listening to the low creak as Rihyarda closed the door behind us.

We headed downstairs, where Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior were awaiting us with their retainers. I would see the archducal couple in the dormitory before my inauguration, and the Archduke Conference would give me plenty of chances to speak with them, but everyone here was too young to participate. I was glad to see my siblings one more time as we made our way to the teleportation hall.

“I never thought you would need to leave for the dormitory early...” Melchior said. He had taken my hand and very cutely insisted on escorting me. “Everyone in the temple will miss you, Sister. Can’t you stay in Ehrenfest a little while longer?”

I smiled and shook my head. “This is urgent business that cannot be postponed.”

“But I am nowhere near good enough as the High Bishop. I cannot match your greatness, Sister.”

“You are working so very hard, Melchior; you need not push yourself any further. I ask only that you cooperate with Philine, Dirk, and Konrad to protect the workshop and orphanage.”

“Sheesh, Rozemyne... You’re always so easy on him and Charlotte,” Wilfried said. He looked none too pleased about my age bias, but I considered it only natural to worry about Melchior, who must have been going above and beyond to make amends for his mistake during the Defense of Ehrenfest.

“Melchior, it is one thing to take inspiration from Rozemyne, but have I not told you to give up on doing things exactly as she did them?” Charlotte asked. “I do not want you to work so hard that you collapse.” She gave him a few reassuring pats on the back, then turned to me and said, “To put him more at ease, I was hoping the four of us could come together for a tea party when you finished your preparations. How unfortunate that we never had the chance.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “I regret that I did not get to spend more time with all of you.”

“Are you serious?” Wilfried asked, squinting at us both. “Even if you’d stayed, Rozemyne, I doubt your schedules would ever have aligned—you rarely spend time in the castle, and Charlotte’s so busy that she can’t even make time to have a tea party with me. Besides, it’s not like we won’t see you at the Royal Academy.”

True enough...

I was hard at work memorizing everything there was to know about Alexandria, and Charlotte was keeping an eye on Ehrenfest while the adults focused on the Archduke Conference. We could maybe find time to exchange intelligence, but scheduling a tea party simply to chat was out of the question.

Still, I didn't see why he'd felt the need to bring that up and ruin the mood. We were only expressing our regret at being separated.

"Wilfried," I said, exchanging a look with Charlotte, "once I move, things will never be the same as they once were. We will not even be able to contact each other by ordonnanz; how can I not be sad to say goodbye?"

"And even if we do reunite at the Royal Academy, we will not be able to speak leisurely in the dining hall or common room," Charlotte added. "I will miss her, and the thought of her leaving makes me uneasy."

"I wanted Rozemyne to stay in Ehrenfest until she came of age," Melchior lamented. "Didn't you, Brother?"

Wilfried faltered under the pressure of our glares and pursed his lips. "Sure, but this was decided over a year ago, and socializing with her in a neighboring duchy is going to be much easier than if she'd moved to the Sovereignty. Not to mention, the new arrangement means Uncle has taken her reins. I'm more relieved than sad; this outcome is bound to make speaking with her easier and more peaceful than any other."

Again, kind of rude, but he isn't wrong at all.

We would be closer than if the king had adopted me. I also wouldn't need to worry about Ferdinand being in another duchy.

"And above all else," Wilfried continued, "Rozemyne said our bond would stay strong even if she moved away. That wasn't a lie, was it?"

"No, not at all," I replied. "I was so reluctant to cut my ties to Ehrenfest that I even asked to keep Sylvester as my adoptive father."

Sylvester had told me I could cancel the adoption. My Old Ahrensbach retainers had supported the idea, asserting that it would make Alexandria less likely to be treated as a vassal state of Ehrenfest, but I'd promptly refused.

"Wilfried, Charlotte, Melchior," I said, "even in Alexandria, I will remain your dear sister. Our relationship will not change. Not by my hand."

"See?" Wilfried crowed, puffing out his chest. "She said it herself—her going to another duchy won't change anything. And we have our symbols of siblinghood, don't we? How's that for a pick-me-up?"

Charlotte and Melchior did seem much happier than before. I could tell they were both pressing their hands against the metal charms marked with the Rozemyne Workshop's crest that we'd fashioned into bracelets and necklaces.

"Sister, let us have many tea parties together when we return to the Royal Academy. Lady Letizia will be old enough to attend, will she not? Please introduce us to her."

"Of course, Charlotte," I replied with a nod. I wanted Letizia involved in the positive relations between our two duchies.

"Sister," Melchior said, "will you tell me all about the gods when I start attending the Academy?"

"That's still some time away, but yes. I look forward to it."

As we laughed together, I suddenly heard a low rumbling noise. Bonifatius roared, "ROZEMYYYNE!" as he charged straight toward us.

"He was told to wait at the teleportation hall," Angelica said, immediately stepping forward with Stenluke at the ready. "His impatience must have taken over."

"Perhaps a bright, low-lethality flash will return him to his senses!" Judithe cried. "Lady Rozemyne, get behind the others!"

Charlotte pulled me behind her guard knights just as Judithe threw a flash grenade. Angelica lowered her stance like a runner on the starting block, then shot forward while the others raised their shields in front of us.

"Use your shield, Angelica! Not your sword!" Lamprecht cried, running alongside her. "Attacking a member of the archducal family with a manablade will get you in serious trouble!"

Despite being Wilfried's guard knight, he was charging ahead with a shield.

"Grandfather, stop this madness!" Lamprecht shouted. "Do you intend to crush Rozemyne?!"

"What madness?! And no, of course I don't! Hmph!"

Bonifatius slowed his charge but still slipped past Lamprecht and Angelica with ease. He then shoved the two knights making up the next line of defense—both Melchior's retainers—against the wall, fanning the flames of worry that he really was going to crush me.

"Do not let Master near Lady Rozemyne!" Angelica called. "He is still in a dangerous state!" Her concern told me that I really was at risk, but I couldn't suppress a smile.

"Grandfather, I thank you ever so much for coming to see me off," I said.

"I came as soon as I received Rihyarda's ordonnanz that you were leaving."

Bonifatius had a tendency to go on somewhat violent rampages, but there was no mistaking how much he doted on me as his one and only granddaughter. He stood up straight and put a hand on his hip, seemingly intent on escorting me. I thought it was heartwarming, but Melchior furrowed his brow.

"Lord Bonifatius, *I* am escorting my sister to the teleportation hall," he said, holding up my hand to prove his point.

Bonifatius sharply cocked an eyebrow in response.

"How about I give my free hand to Grandfather?" I asked, hoping to avoid a fight between the former knight commander and a literal child. I placed my left hand on Bonifatius's arm and continued to hold Melchior's hand with my right as we continued toward our destination.

"Do you really need to leave...?" Bonifatius asked.

"Oh my. Would *you* abandon a duchy whose foundation you stole?"

"I'm not that irresponsible," he grunted, his face twisted in a grimace. Though he was a loose cannon in so many regards, he was strict about our duties as archducal family members. If I turned around and said that I didn't want

Ahrensbach's foundation now that Ferdinand was safe, then he would surely be furious and declare that I shouldn't have launched a rescue operation in the first place.

"I am so grateful to you, Grandfather. You not only trained my guard knights but also warned me about tarnishing the sanctity of name-swearing. Even now, I think about all the fun times we had together during those Archduke Conferences." I recounted him praising me when I'd worked with him and our wacky antics while gathering in the noble forest.

"You know, Rozemyne, there was no need for you to shoulder this burden... It isn't easy for a woman to be an aub. Not at all. *And* you're underage."

"I recognize the challenge to come, but I will not face it alone; I have Ferdinand and my wonderful retainers to support me." The former had promised to protect the duchy and me with it, while the latter had given me their names and vowed to follow me to the very end.

Despite my best attempts to reassure him, Bonifatius grimaced again. "That boy infuriates me."

"Do you really distrust Ferdinand that much?" I asked, meeting his unnecessarily extreme reaction with a reproachful glare.

Bonifatius balled his hands into fists. "It's not about trust. *I'm* the one who rescued you from Grausam when he poisoned and kidnapped you. Ferdinand swooped in and stole you from me, then blocked me from seeing you for two whole years; why does *he* get to be the victor?"

Hmm? That's not how I remember it. As I recall, Grandfather was about to swing me into a tree when Ferdinand saved me, fed me an antidote, then kept any nobles from approaching the temple while I recovered.

"Not to mention," Bonifatius continued, "Ferdinand made a great enough blunder to get poisoned and almost die. He needed you to go rescue him, but now he's cocky enough to treat my adorable granddaughter like his wife and tie her to a tough life as an aub? Tell me what you see in him. In my eyes, he's rotten to the core!"

He sounded exactly like an overprotective father, which was strange because

Karstedt had welcomed my engagement with open arms.

“Ferdinand has helped me for as long as I have known him,” I said. “I can only hope you will one day come to acknowledge him.”

Bonifatius frowned and said nothing in response—which was better than him saying anything negative, I thought. I didn’t expect him to acknowledge Ferdinand so easily and could only giggle at his obstinacy.

“I shall return to Ehrenfest to fetch Damuel and Philine when Philine comes of age,” I said. “Until then, I must ask you to take care of my retainers being left behind.”

“That much I can do. Damuel will remain here with me until you’re ready for him.”

Once they confirmed that Bonifatius was calm and I was safe, Bertilde and Judithe went ahead of us to inspect the teleportation room. They would teleport last.

“If you will excuse us, Lady Rozemyne.”

We had reached the end of the road. I turned my attention to the gathered members of Ehrenfest’s archducal family.

“I was adopted into Ehrenfest’s archducal family immediately after my baptism. Malicious rumors spread through other duchies that I was treated worse than my siblings, but that could not have been further from the truth; my adoptive parents let me do as I wished, my siblings cherished me as their sister, and my grandfather doted on me as his granddaughter. I am truly blessed to have spent time with you all.”

Sylvester knew about my background as a commoner, and my relationship with Florencia was as good as could be—especially compared to what Ferdinand had been through with Veronica. I was also fortunate to get along so well with my brothers and sister; Detlinde, Letizia, and my retainers’ families had taught me that it was rare for siblings who didn’t share the same mother to be on good terms.

“That is why I hope to preserve our relationships even after I leave Ehrenfest. I might be Aub Alexandria the next time we meet, but I pray that we can remain as close as ever.”

As everyone nodded, a knight inside the teleportation hall called out that the circle was ready.

“Let us go, Lady Rozemyne.”

I entered the hall with Ottilie and Angelica, each step heavier than the last. This was the last time I would ever be in this castle as an Ehrenfest noble; any future visits I made would be as the aub of another duchy. I would not even use this teleporter again.

Swallowing my apprehension, I moved onto the circle and then smiled at everyone who had come to watch me go. “I await the day that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves our threads together again. I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until then.”

The feystone within my brooch shone as the magic circle erupted in black and golden light. I watched the world around me distort until the faces of my loved ones faded away completely.

The Morning of the Inauguration Ceremony

My first course of action at the Ehrenfest Dormitory was to circle around and greet the Leisegangs. Ottilie had made me a list of the faction’s most important nobles and the scholars whom I would do well to get along with.

“Let us first go to the common room,” I said.

At this time of year, the common room functioned as a meeting spot where the duchy’s nobles could chat about the Archduke Conference. I moved to join them, and all eyes fell on me; some of the people gathered clearly wanted to speak with me, while others were upset just to see my face. The air was sharp and uncomfortable.

Before I could go any farther, a scholar stepped in front of me. “My apologies, Lady Rozemyne, but we are using this room to discuss the Archduke Conference. As someone leaving for another duchy, you cannot be allowed to enter.”

“I do not intend to stay,” I said. “There are some here who are displeased about my new retainers visiting the tea party room, correct? I wish only to apologize to them.”

The scholar raised a surprised eyebrow at me, then stepped aside.

“Neither Ferdinand nor I took anyone who participated in the invasion of Ehrenfest into our retinue,” I declared. “That said, I understand that many of you cannot stand even the sight of a violet cape. Failing to anticipate that was an unfortunate mistake on my part. I have forbidden them from entering Ehrenfest’s tea party room, so you will not need to worry about seeing them in this dormitory.”

Having apologized to the nobles, I explained that we had taken our retainers from among those who had worked with us in Gerlach.

“Sending them to fight on the front line ran the risk of friendly fire, so they mostly captured foes on the ground and invaded their hidden bases,” I said. “So secretive was their work that most Ehrenfest nobles never even knew they were there. In this vein, I must ask you to appreciate that not everyone from Old Ahrensbach is your enemy. We cannot judge an entire duchy by the color of their cape; otherwise, we might as well say the Leisegangs and those of the former Veronica faction are all the same.”

And with that, there was only one more thing for me to address.

“Brunhilde and Charlotte have informed me of the Leisegangs’ assistance during and since the Battle of Ehrenfest. As it stands, I can give them no more than my thanks, but I promise not to leave this debt unpaid. My main priority is reaching the end of this conference without issue; once it is over, I shall work with Ehrenfest on a more appropriate display of my appreciation.”

I didn’t forget to mention that the Gutenbergs would soon be passing through Leisegang and that I didn’t want any funny business.

Well, the atmosphere seems calmer now, at least.

I exhaled upon completing my long explanation; no longer were Ehrenfest’s nobles watching me with uptight, blatantly dissatisfied expressions. Some of them were probably still thinking less-than-positive thoughts, but as Charlotte had advised me, none of them would make their displeasure public if I promised them wealth from Alexandria.

Forbidden from entering the common room, I spent most of my time in my chambers, leaving only during meals to greet the nobles in the dining hall. In the privacy of my room, I reviewed the steps of the inauguration ceremony and meticulously memorized everything I needed to know about Alexandria.

On the morning of the Archduke Conference, I awoke much earlier than usual. The inauguration ceremony was first on the agenda, with the Starbind Ceremony due to follow. I was expected to be in the waiting room on the early side, so I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and went to bathe.

Bertilde and Ottilie scrubbed me down, then dressed me in my underclothes and sat me in front of a mirror. They had draped a gown over my shoulders to keep me from getting cold. Bertilde got straight to work brushing my hair, a most serious look in her eyes. She had said that doing hair was her specialty and stressed that this was her last opportunity to touch mine.

“Lady Rozemyne, have these while you can.”

Ottilie soon presented me with fruit juice and a light breakfast. Tea party rooms and waiting rooms were usually supplied with fruit and various bite-size snacks, so I wouldn’t need anything else before lunch. I started eating while taking care not to move my head too much.

“I shall do your makeup when you are done,” Ottilie said. “A young lady about to stand in front of such a large crowd should pay extra attention to her appearance.” She helped with doing my hair at first, then took away my empty cup and plate and started applying my makeup.

“Lady Rozemyne, we have returned.”

At second bell, several of my retainers showed up from the Alexandria Dormitory—Leonore, Angelica, Lieseleta, and Clarissa. Now that they had all moved, there was no longer a place for them in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. They had lost access at the same time as my departure.

“Your male retainers will fetch you from the tea party room when it is time to go,” Clarissa informed me. “The scholars are spending the time until then in a meeting with Lord Ferdinand, while I am here to burn the sight of your preparation into my mind.”

I wish you’d gone with them...

Everything seemed to get louder and busier the moment Clarissa arrived. I made eye contact with Leonore through the mirror while going over phrases of praise laden with divine allegory.

“Laurenz, Roderick, and Gretia are staying in the castle because of their age, correct?” I asked. “How are they? Has the status of the castle changed to any extent?” Many of the nobles who had supported Detlinde were there, so I worried about the minors we hadn’t been able to bring with us.

“Gretia is stationed in the dormitory. She cannot be here—we would rather not risk her being seen by nobles of another duchy—but you have so few retainers, and we thought you would feel more at ease with those you know.”

“That much is true. I appreciate your consideration. Does that mean Laurenz and Roderick are the only ones in the castle?”

“Laurenz is a knight,” Leonore said with a smile. “You need not worry about him.”

I recognize that look... It means I really shouldn’t dig any deeper.

Laurenz must have been entrusted with a special duty of some kind. I elected to keep my mouth firmly shut.

“Do not frown, Lady Rozemyne,” Ottilie cautioned me. “Part your lips a tad.”

“I shall insert your hair ornaments,” Bertilde added.

Together, the pair worked to prepare me for the inauguration ceremony. This was their final time serving me, so today and today alone, my head attendant, Lieseleta, had taken a step back. She put away my used cosmetics and nightwear, then brought a box out from the clothing room.

“Now to dress you,” Ottilie said. “Put your arms through this, if you will.”

My attendants reached into the box and took out a long-sleeved shirt, a pannier, and more. They were busy helping me put them on when Lieseleta brought out my aqua-and-navy-blue dress.

“Oh my...” Clarissa cooed, her eyes sparkling with interest. “The rumors were true...”

“My adoptive mother ordered this dress for me,” I said. “I saw her clothes on the day I received mine, but I cannot wait to see Brunhilde. The three of us have coordinated our outfits.”

Clarissa blinked at me a few times, then let out a small “Huh.” It wasn’t quite the response I’d expected. Was there something wrong with three gals of the Ehrenfest archducal family wearing matching clothes?

“Um, Clarissa... You mentioned *rumors*... Have people in Alexandria been discussing my dress?”

“Its lighter hue matches Lord Ferdinand’s hair, so many believe you chose to be enveloped in a color reminiscent of your beloved.” Being the focus of the first-ever inauguration of an underage aub was bound to be stressful, so people thought I’d swapped out my seasonal color for something that would provide a little more comfort.

“That’s just a coincidence!” I cried. “It wasn’t intentional in the slightest!”

“Still, did you not go out of your way to ask him to wear matching clothes? I am told that his outfit is based on the color of your hair. Among noblewomen, this is being treated as the stuff of romantic legend. The same was true of your engagement ceremony.”

Hold on. I don’t know who’s spreading these lies, but Alexandria’s turned into a real mess in my absence!

“Did you know about these rumors, Lieseleta?” I assumed so, since she’d visited Alexandria to prepare my chambers, but she hadn’t mentioned them in any of her reports.

“I did, but I never suspected they were untrue. I was preparing for my move when you made the request, and when the letter arrived, I thought only that your motivation was heartwarming.” She had overheard the rumors but hadn’t considered them notable enough to mention.

Ngh... Being split up like this sucks.

“It is too late to change, and there is nothing wrong with appearing on good terms with Lord Ferdinand,” Ottilie interjected, speaking dryly as she continued to dress me. “The nobles of other duchies will not know about Alexandria’s rumors, so try to emphasize your closeness with Ehrenfest. Do that, and there should not be any issues.”

That much was true. There wouldn’t be any issues... except my overwhelming embarrassment.

And that’s the worst one!

“I suspect this is all part of a plot,” Ottilie remarked. “It feels very much like something that Hartmut or Lord Ferdinand would devise.”

My head started to cool. Now that she mentioned it, this was *clearly* a scheme of some kind. I didn’t have time to waste being embarrassed; if we didn’t prepare ourselves, I would get wrapped up in something beyond my understanding.

By the time we were ready to go, I was completely calm.

“Philine, Clarissa, inform the others that Lady Rozemyne is ready.”

In response to Ottilie’s instruction, Philine and Clarissa sent ordonnanzes to the Ehrenfest archducal family and to Ferdinand’s group in the Alexandria Dormitory. I spoke to my remaining Ehrenfest retainers in the meantime.

“Ottilie, you became my attendant at my mother’s request, did you not? Your burden must have grown immensely when Rihyarda left. I thank you for your service throughout so many trials and tribulations. You have my heartfelt gratitude.”

“It was an honor,” she replied. “I am less melancholic about our parting and more worried about your future. Please chastise Hartmut if ever his behavior becomes too much. It is precisely because he is so prodigious that we must not allow him to get carried away.”

Seeing the serious, motherly look in Ottilie’s eyes made me worry as well. She had always kept Hartmut under some degree of control; how was I supposed to manage without her?

I guess I need to try. Though I’d rather not know what he’s been up to in my absence...

“Hartmut aside, what are your plans for the future?” I asked.

“I expect to join Lady Brunhilde’s service,” she replied, shooting a wry smile at Bertilde, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Eheheh... I secured Judithe *and* Ottilie,” Bertilde rejoiced. “In the words of my elder sister, ‘Together, we shall preserve Lady Rozemyne’s accomplishments long into the future. She improved our fair duchy with aplomb, but many of her changes have yet to take root. It is best for those of us who served under her to unite and ensure their preservation.’”

She had attempted to do an impression of Brunhilde—and managed it quite well, honestly.

“I have spent the least amount of time in your service, Lady Rozemyne, but I will do my best alongside my sister and the rest of your retainers who are staying behind," Bertilde declared, her amber eyes sparkling brightly. She was so cute that I reached out to stroke her rose-pink hair.

"I expect great things from you and your sister. Do tell me about Ehrenfest when we next meet at the Academy. However, be careful not to let your emotions control you or force those beneath you to act against their wishes." I turned my attention to my next retainer. "Judithe, what do you wish to do?"

I was pretty sure she had mentioned wanting to move to Alexandria after coming of age. Serving as Brunhilde's retainer would thwart those plans, which made me suspect that Bertilde, an archnoble, had been a little too pushy for a mednoble to refuse.

Judithe squeezed the feystone emblazoned with the Rozemyne Workshop's crest. "I want to reunite with you when I come of age. I really do. But I think I might just be getting emotional. I've been worried ever since Ottilie told me to think carefully about my future, and now... I just don't know anymore." She could imagine a future in Kirnberger or the city of Ehrenfest but not getting married and raising children in Alexandria.

"I understand your concern. Though I will try my best to protect my retainers, I can only do so much. If you gather more intelligence and think things over, I am sure you will come to a reasonable conclusion."

"R-Right." Judithe frowned with unease, maybe feeling that I was pushing her away.

Philine averted her eyes and said, "We must not demand too much from Lady Rozemyne," most likely remembering the discussion about Konrad. "Looking after someone means overseeing their life, to an extent. How would you feel about leaving work to get married and start a family, only for me and the other retainers to bombard you with ordonnanzes requesting updates and weighing in with our thoughts? Take a moment to imagine it."

Judithe paused, and a smile appeared on her face. "I would find that kind of treatment annoying even from my own parents." It didn't matter if the ordonnanzes were being sent out of concern and consideration—too much contact would seem both frustrating and overbearing.

"In my honest opinion," I said, "being able to depend on one's family when getting married and raising children is a great privilege. It will cease to be an option for those who come with me to Alexandria and is already out of the question for anyone who lost their family to execution or had to flee from their abuse."

Not everyone was on good enough terms with their parents and extended family to count on their support. Judithe let out a small exclamation of surprise when she realized that.

"There is no need to rush this decision," I said. "You will always be known as one of my retainers, whether you come with me or not. Think carefully and make whatever choice you are least likely to regret."

"Right!" Judithe replied, now brimming with her usual enthusiasm.

I nodded at her, then indicated that we should depart for the tea party room. I gave my room one last look before taking my leave.

"Philine," I said as we headed down the corridor, "I shall entrust the temple's orphanage to you. I suspect that losing both Fran and Zahm will severely impact the temple."

"It will," she replied. "The handover was performed under the assumption they would remain in Ehrenfest for quite a while longer. As we speak, they are doing their best to give Monika and Nicola the education they need to take over."

Together with Ferdinand, Hartmut had moved to poach Fran and Zahm immediately after the Defense of Ehrenfest. Everyone in the temple must have panicked when they heard the news. I was truly sorry about that, but Fran and Zahm would play essential roles in revolutionizing Alexandria's temple.

"Ferdinand and I need gray priests who understand what Hartmut wishes to accomplish," I explained. "I apologize, but please do your best with the remaining attendants."

"I shall."

It was then that we reached the staircase. I gazed down and met eyes with Damuel, who was waiting at the bottom.

“Oh, and if you encounter anything that you don’t understand, rely on Damuel as much as you need to.”

“Lady Rozemyne! Please stop!” Philine exclaimed, her cheeks turning crimson. She glanced sheepishly between Damuel and me.

“I must ask you not to tease her too much,” Damuel said. Even from a distance, he had gathered what I was up to. “The others have done it so regularly that she is especially sensitive right now.”

“As far as I was concerned, we were having a normal conversation...” I replied.

Damuel eyed me critically and asked, “About what?”

“About the hole that will remain when Fran and Zahm take their leave. I told Philine she can depend on you as much as she needs to. You have spent more time working in the temple than any of my other retainers, which makes you something of an expert when it comes to its business.” A less observant eye might assume that he simply helped with basic math in the High Priest’s chambers, but he had watched me work while serving as a guard and assisted with making everything run smoothly.

I returned my attention to Philine. “Damuel seldom has need to mention it, but he has a baseline understanding of everything there is to know about the temple. He should prove crucial to you all once Fran and Zahm are gone. Nicola cares far more about cooking and does not have much of an affinity for paperwork, so I doubt she is anywhere near as informed.”

“I might be better than her in some regards, but I still pale in comparison to Monika,” Damuel noted. “At the very least, I know where documents are stored and what purposes they serve, so I can assist with looking up whatever one needs to know.” It was a matter of course for us, but a normal guard knight wouldn’t be that familiar with paperwork. Philine looked surprised as well.

“Not to mention, he has a history of standing his ground whenever Hartmut tried to develop the temple from an ill-suited noble perspective. Melchior and Kazmiar are bound to make the same mistakes, and in those cases, Damuel should provide more than adequate pushback.”

No matter how good their intentions might be, Ehrenfest's new High Priest and High Bishop would cause all sorts of problems if they attempted to run the temple in a way that only made sense to nobles. I needed a stopper of sorts to prevent that from happening.

Damuel couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Lady Rozemyne, isn't it a bit much to ask me to speak out against the archducal family and their retainers?!"

"Not at all. You will remain an archducal retainer for as long as you work under my grandfather. I trust that you will use your status to protect what is precious to me."

"As you wish..." he eventually conceded, looking troubled nonetheless.

"That includes you, Philine."

"Lady Rozemyne!" they both cried out in unison. "So you *were* teasing us!"

I was still chuckling by the time we reached the tea party room. Now we just needed to wait for Ferdinand to arrive from the Alexandria Dormitory.

Norbert, who was stationed in the room, handed me some tea and sweets. "Lady Rozemyne, might I assume you had only a light breakfast? Partake in these, if you so wish. Just take care not to smudge your lipstick."

I consumed a few bite-size snacks, eating only as much as would stop my stomach from groaning during the ceremony. It was around then that Brunhilde, the archducal couple, and their retainers entered.

"We came to see you off," Sylvester explained.

Florencia lined up next to him, while Brunhilde stood next to her, indicating that she was less Sylvester's fiancée and more an aide to his first wife. Her clothes were also dark green and seemed to match what Florencia was wearing.

"Brunhilde—you wanted to speak with Rozemyne, right?" Sylvester asked.

She took a step forward at his prompting and said, "Lady Rozemyne, I am ever so grateful that you spoke to the Leisegang nobles." Her demeanor had changed completely from when she was my attendant; now she acted more like an archducal family member than an archnoble. I was glad to see the fruits of her labor.

“Do you regret entering the archducal family?” I asked. She had told me she would marry Sylvester to compensate for my lack of social skills. I worried that she wished she hadn’t now that I was moving to another duchy.

Brunhilde looked me in the eye and, true to her nature, shot me a victorious smile. “Fear not. I am proud to be here as I am now.”

Seeing my ex-attendant, I couldn’t help but notice how much she had grown from the days when Groschel neglected to communicate with its commoners and almost allowed its printing industry to collapse. She had displayed excellent skill in acquiring food from Leisegang during the Defense of Ehrenfest and working with Charlotte to keep its nobles under control. I could trust her with meeting merchants in the temple and expected her to be considerate of my retainers.

“I can leave Ehrenfest with the comfort of knowing that everyone is in safe hands,” I said. “I trust you to work well with Charlotte, my adoptive mother, and everyone else, to meet with the duchy’s merchants, and to look out for my retainers who are staying behind.”

“Your trust is well placed. Henceforth, I shall attend the Archduke Conference as Lady Florencia’s assistant. We can expect to have many more chances to see each other, so this need not be a farewell. It would not suit us. Instead, I shall say this—live prosperously!”

Our eyes met, and we both smiled. I was glad this wasn’t our final meeting and that we were still close enough to look forward to reuniting.

“Indeed,” I said. “Let us meet again.”

Brunhilde returned to Florencia’s side. Sylvester asked my adoptive mother if she wanted to exchange a few words with me too, but she shook her head.

“We have no need for a dramatic farewell. I spoke to Rozemyne just the other day, and we are sure to meet throughout the conference.” She pinched up her skirt to reveal cloth of a pattern identical to my own, though it wasn’t the same color. I copied the gesture in response.

“So, what do you think, O adoptive father of mine?” I slotted myself right between Brunhilde and Florencia. “Our cloth and sashes are patterned the same. Do we match when lined up?”

He grinned and clapped his hands together. “Yep. Looks good to me.”

We continued to chat among ourselves until, at last, Ferdinand arrived with his retinue. My male retainers were with them.

“It is rather busy in here,” Ferdinand remarked.

“Behold,” I said to him, taking a step forward and twirling in place. “Notice something about Brunhilde, my adoptive mother, and me?”

Florencia watched with a smile, then moved to stand beside me. “Rozemyne proposed that we all wear matching outfits. Her intention to demonstrate her continued closeness with Ehrenfest warmed my heart. I am certain that, even as an aub, she will manage to take the path in life she desires. You have been doing these things for years, Lord Ferdinand, but I will say this nonetheless—support, discipline, and guide Rozemyne where you can.”

“I shall,” Ferdinand replied with a nod, his expression softening.

Sylvester approached us as well. “To be honest, Rozemyne, I couldn’t be more relieved that you took over Ahrensbach. You removed a major threat from our border, and your new duchy is guaranteed to be better than what came before it. Let’s be good to each other. And on that note, make sure to go easy on us during this conference.”

“You will need to ask Ferdinand first,” I said. “He might scold me for showing favoritism.”

“Of course he would. That’s why I want you to sneak in a sweet deal or two while he isn’t looking.”

Sylvester was saying all this blatantly within earshot of the man he was telling me to defy—though I supposed that was no surprise. Ferdinand shot him a glare but changed the subject without saying whether he would allow favoritism.

“Have you finished all of your preparations?” he asked meaningfully.

“Not quite yet...” Sylvester replied at length. He waved a hand, and a scholar brought over a small box. “I’ll give you the medals, so hand me back the registration brooches. You needed them to deal with that Lanzenave business while Rozemyne wasn’t an aub, but they won’t be necessary once you’re all proper Alexandrians.”

We accepted the medals of all those coming with us—Lasfam, Matthias, Lieseleta, Angelica, Hartmut, Leonore, and Cornelius—before returning our registration brooches. No longer could we enter the Ehrenfest Dormitory.

“Rozemyne, what will you do with the medals of the minors in the castle?” Sylvester asked.

“I took their registration brooches ahead of time,” Ferdinand answered in my stead. “As for their medals, Rozemyne will keep them as their lady.”

On cue, I took Laurenz’s, Gretia’s, and Roderick’s medals and put them with my own.

“Eckhart. Justus,” Ferdinand called. They stood on either side of him, and the three of them held out their borrowed registration brooches. “Aub Ehrenfest, I express my sincerest gratitude for your aid.”

A scholar held out a box, which Sylvester lazily dropped the brooches into. There was a light clatter as they struck the bottom. That concluded our business with Ehrenfest, so the conversation quickly died out. We spent several seconds just exchanging silent glances.

Sylvester gave his shoulders a small shrug. It must have brought the rest of us back to our senses because we all moved as if on cue. Ehrenfest’s group approached the door to their dormitory before turning back to Ferdinand and me. We stood with our backs to the room’s other exit, while our retainers waited in formation behind us.

“I await the day that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves our threads together again. I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until then.”

Sylvester and I exchanged farewells as the representatives of our groups. Ferdinand then gave me his hand, and together we walked past my retainers staying in Ehrenfest. Only when we reached the wide-open door did we stop and turn around.

I gazed upon Ottilie, Bertilde, Philine, Judithe, and Damuel. They all wore the same somber expression as Rihyarda when we exchanged our farewells in the castle. I needed to march forward, no matter how much it hurt.

My retainers knelt as one.

“Lady Rozemyne, the time has come for you to tread a new path. May we pray for Jugereise the Goddess of Separation to bless your road ahead and the start of your journey?”

“You may.”

“O Jugereise the Goddess of Separation, please protect our lady on her departure.”

Blessings rose from each of their rings. Ferdinand and I passed through the doorway as the light rained down upon me.

The Inauguration Ceremony

"Lady Rozemyne, come with me, if you would."

I was sitting in the waiting room when the Sovereign scholar serving as our guide called out. Ferdinand escorted me over to him. There was a limit to how many retainers could accompany us during the inauguration ceremony—four guard knights, one scholar, and one attendant per duchy—so we'd chosen Eckhart, Cornelius, Leonore, and Angelica as my knights, Hartmut as my scholar, and Lieseleta as my attendant.

"Please wait here," the guide said.

We stopped and saw figures lined up in front of the wide-open doors to the auditorium. I recognized them as Trauerqual and Magdalena with their retainers.

"Enter, those of the newly established duchy of Blumenfeld," Eglantine called.

The two ex-royals entered the auditorium to the cheers of the gathered nobles. I was relieved to know that Trauerqual was being welcomed as an aub despite giving up the throne. The door was shut behind them.

That was *Lady Magdalena with Lord Trauerqual, wasn't it?*

Magdalena was his third wife; it was unthinkable for her to be with him in a public setting like the Archduke Conference. Even if the first wife was stricken with illness, the second wife would take her place.

"Ferdinand, what happened to Lady Ralfrieda?" I asked.

"Who can say? Perhaps she was held accountable for putting Raublut forward to become the knight commander in the first place, then sent back to Gilessenmeyer after their divorce. Rarely are these matters made public."

"If you are speaking about Mother, then yes, she was held accountable and reduced to the status of a third wife," said a voice behind us. "Lady Magdalena took her place. It would seem Father prioritized his public image over the woman who spent years and years supporting him."

We turned around and saw Sigiswald with his wife Nahelache. He was clearly displeased about his mother's reduction in status, but Ferdinand did not agree.

"That was a natural decision for a leader to make. The complexity of ruling a new duchy depends greatly on its first wife."

The duchy Trauerqual was going to rule included half of Old Werkestock. Its land was all but devoid of mana, and the nobles there despised the royal family for treating them with disdain after the civil war. Magdalena, who had taken part in capturing Raublut, would surely have a much easier time gaining the duchy's support and sympathy than Ralfrieda, who had put him forward to become the knight commander. *And* she was from Dunkelfelger.

I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear Ferdinand mutter, "It seems Lord Trauerqual can *make wise decisions when he needs to."*

"Furthermore," Ferdinand continued, "this arrangement is for Lady Ralfrieda's benefit. As a first wife, she would have faced a storm of criticisms, but as a third wife, she can comfortably support Lord Trauerqual from the shadows."

Trauerqual could easily have divorced her and sent her back home. Instead, he had given her the means to live in peace and with the permission of his other wives. One could say Ralfrieda was being treated exceptionally well.

"You need not worry about your mother," Ferdinand concluded. I nodded my agreement.

"If you would excuse us, Lady Rozemyne, Lord Sigiswald must enter the auditorium ahead of you," said the Sovereign scholar guiding him and Nahelache, his tone sincerely apologetic. "May we pass?"

As it stood, Sigiswald and Nahelache were still technically members of the royal family—their status wouldn't change until their inauguration. They must have come from the waiting room for royals, not archducal couples, which was farther away and explained why we had arrived outside the auditorium before them.

"Of course," I replied, making way for them. "Lord Trauerqual went in before you arrived. You must be in quite a rush."

The scholar urged Sigiswald and Nahelache to hurry themselves, but it was no use; they moved slowly and elegantly despite the risk that they might not be ready in time.

“You really should move faster,” I said. “We did not get here early—the two of you arrived late.”

“Does it matter?” Sigiswald replied. “No matter how long we take, the ceremony cannot proceed without me.” For some strange reason, he still genuinely believed the world should revolve around him. That might have been appropriate behavior for a royal, but times were changing. He wasn’t even wearing a black cape anymore, since he was about to receive a cape of his duchy’s color.

“Zent Eglantine decides the pace of today’s inauguration, not you. The doors will open whether you are ready or not, and you will expose yourself to the entire country as someone too foolish to even line up properly.”

Sigiswald met my warning with a look of surprise. Had no one else been in a position to give frank advice to a semi-royal, or had they simply not expected a man of his status to be completely blind to something so obvious?

“Quickly now,” the guide said. “The door is about to open.”

Sigiswald, Nahelache, and their retainers rushed to stand in front of the door. Their placement wasn’t perfect, but it was good enough that the nobles in the auditorium probably wouldn’t realize they had only barely made it in time.

“Enter, those of the newly established duchy of Korinthsdaum.”

Sigiswald and Nahelache advanced upon hearing Eglantine’s call, their retainers in formation around them. Nobles cheered as they made their entrance. The doors soon closed behind them, and their guide thanked me for my assistance before leaving.

“His arrogance will cause him great trouble as an aub,” Ferdinand remarked, a little taken aback. “Aub Drewanchel should praise Lady Adolphine’s sagacity in securing a speedy divorce.”

Indeed, it would be problematic if Sigiswald continued to act like a royal after becoming an archduke, and reeducating him would prove quite the task. It had surprised me how firmly Adolphine pushed for a divorce, but now I couldn't blame her in the least.

"It took seeing Lord Sigiswald with Lady Nahelache for me to realize just how cold and distant he was with Lady Adolphine," I said. "An astute observer can gauge the strength of a couple's relationship purely by how close they stand to each other." I wouldn't have described it as obvious, but they were unconsciously letting their feelings show.

"Oh...?" Ferdinand murmured.

Hmm? He looks like he's plotting something...

I read his expression and immediately tensed up.

"Tell me, then—how close would you expect a couple on good terms to stand?" Ferdinand asked with an inscrutable look on his face.

"Hm? Umm... If we use Sylvester and Florencia or Lord Anastasius and Zent Eglantine as a reference, maybe about... this close?" I took a small step closer to him while trying to envision the couples we knew.

"I see. In that case, stay this distance from me until the Archduke Conference is over."

"I recognize that look on your face, Ferdinand—it's the look of a man plotting something." I thrust a finger at him. "I can see right through you, and your foul schemes will amount to nothing!"

Ferdinand put on a radiant smile, completing his transformation into the undefeatable Lord of Evil, and grabbed me by the shoulders. "I think we should remain this close for the duration of the Archduke Conference, at least. Your response?"

Eep! "Refusing to comply will only cause you trouble." That's what he's going to tell me, isn't it? I can already hear him tearing me to shreds!

To begin with, this conference couldn't even start without Ferdinand. My only choice was to play into his evil, evil hands.

"Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne—please line up in front of the doors," our guide said. "Two of your knights should stand at the front, then yourselves, and then your other two knights. Your scholar and attendant should stand at the back.”

Upon confirming that we had all taken our places—in a far more organized manner than Sigiswald, Nahelache, and their retainers—our guide briskly took his leave. He probably needed to prepare for the upcoming Starbind Ceremony. I was wondering how tough it must be to arrange everything in the background when the two brothers in our group started fighting.

“Cornelius, shouldn’t you and Leonore take the front?” Eckhart asked.

“Given our age and status, the honor should go to you and Angelica.”

“This isn’t about status. If we take the lead, Rozemyne won’t be able to keep up with us, and our formation will come apart midway through the auditorium.”

Huh? Why is everyone agreeing with him?! I’ve grown! My legs are longer now! Hmph!

In the end, Leonore and Cornelius stood at the front, followed by Ferdinand and me, Eckhart and Angelica, and then Hartmut and Lieseleta. Hartmut groaned that he would have taken the lead if the attendant and scholar weren’t required to stay at the rear. He and Lieseleta were carrying boxes—a very important duty of theirs.

“The doors are about to open,” Eckhart said, having been watching the knights.

We all faced forward and straightened our backs as the doors opened, allowing us to see inside the auditorium. A long carpet served as our guide, stretching from the door to the stage, where Eglantine was waiting in High Bishop robes. She must have chosen to wear them for the upcoming Starbind Ceremony.

She sure is working hard.

Back when I first joined the temple, I’d studied relentlessly to memorize prayers, ceremonial procedures, and the relevant participants. I’d done the same again when I took over as Ehrenfest’s High Bishop. I could only imagine how much more intense it must have been for Eglantine, who was tasked with performing these ceremonies as the Zent and the Sovereign High Bishop simultaneously. The thought alone sent a shiver down my spine.

“Rozemyne, where is your mind wandering?” Ferdinand warned in a quiet voice. “Focus.”

Eglantine’s voice reverberated through the auditorium with the aid of a sound-amplifying magic tool. “Enter, those of the newly established duchy of Alexandria.”

“Let’s go,” I said just loud enough for Leonore and Cornelius to hear me.

An ocean of eyes fell on us the moment we entered the auditorium, so scathing that I could almost feel them piercing through me. Everyone had cheered for Trauerqual and Sigiswald, but my arrival was met with hushed whispers and trepidatious remarks. I could feel it in my bones that I wasn’t welcome as an aub.

This is nothing like the transference ceremony.

I was still facing forward when the doors shut behind us; Hartmut and Lieseleta, the rear of our formation, must have made it into the auditorium. It felt like there was no going back—like there was no longer a way for me to escape.

Well, I already knew how harshly other nobles would view an underage aub.

Even then, the sense of rejection was far more intense than I’d expected. There were so many critical eyes on me, and the thought of having to endure them for the entire Archduke Conference made me more and more anxious. Ferdinand must have noticed—or maybe he just felt me slow down—because he nudged me ever so slightly.

“Alexandria is your dream, is it not?” he whispered quietly enough that only I could hear him. “Would you have it taken by another?”

I couldn’t understand him at first; my brain was too full of stressed and anxious thoughts. Only when I took a moment to repeat his words in my mind did everything fall into place.

Oh, right. It’s my dream to have a library city.

I remembered the newly constructed city of Alexandria, the library that had yet to open, the boxes waiting to be emptied, the hidden room in my library chambers, and the teleportation circle within it. They were all things I desired and could only have as the aub. No matter what anyone said, I refused to let them go.

I took the foundation, and that makes me the aub. Nothing will change that.

As my mind swelled with thoughts of everything that mattered to me, I ceased caring about the nobles watching me. Once this dumb inauguration ceremony was behind me, I would return to my library and get to work. I wanted to teach the scholars my Rozemyne Decimal System and stack the shelves with books—those I'd taken from Ehrenfest *and* those we'd found in Ahrensbach's castle. I also had plans in place to receive copies of every book printed in the future.

At long last, I'll get to read as much as I want! I remember the days when I couldn't even find text, much less books!

Looking back, I really had come a long way. I'd spent so much of my time in the lower city having to survive without books or anything else to read, so my first stone slate from Otto had been life-changing. I couldn't forget the excitement of writing in Japanese, and learning Yurgenschmidt's alphabet had proven tremendously useful.

A single philosophy kept me going: if there aren't any books, then I'll just have to make some!

Of course, that was easier said than done; I'd started out with no paper, no ink, and none of the money or resources necessary to make my own. I was too young, too weak, and too sickly with almost nothing to my name. Lutz and I had tried making various replacements for books, but our attempts had continuously ended in failure. Only when we met Benno did we really start progressing.

Adults with economic power sure are something else.

Paper-making had progressed smoothly with the Gilberta Company's support, but the Devouring heat had almost killed me. I really had thought I might die before completing my first book. If not for Freida's help, I probably wouldn't even have made it to my baptism ceremony.

Learning how to survive with the Devouring was huge.

On the topic of my baptism, that was when I'd chanced upon the temple's book room—the first one I'd ever seen in this world. I'd met with the previous High Bishop in an attempt to access it, and while the events that followed caused me so much anguish, I didn't regret becoming an apprentice blue shrine maiden. My choice had allowed me not only to enter the temple's book room but also to survive my mana capacity without being some noble's slave.

It's a shame I never got to spend as much time there as I wanted to.

More things had gotten in the way than I expected, such as repairing my relationship with my temple attendants and revolutionizing the orphanage. Despite that, we'd still managed to make an orphanage branch of the Myne Workshop and complete our first proper book, kick-starting the printing industry. It was very satisfying.

For the record, I still think Ferdinand was cruel for not letting me read those books about magic!

My mana capacity alone had convinced the previous High Bishop to let me become an apprentice blue shrine maiden, so he'd made me take part in all sorts of religious ceremonies. For all the headaches they had caused me, I still considered the prayers and chants I'd memorized to be a crucial part of everything that followed.

Another huge event I remembered was Ferdinand going through my memories of my Urano days. The experience had done plenty to help him understand my strange behavior and provided various other benefits in the process.

But it also sealed my fate of becoming a noble and resulted in my separation from my lower-city family...

As a result of the previous High Bishop attacking me, that enormous change in my life had come about sooner than anticipated. Sylvester had arrived just in time to save my family from execution, and even now, I was grateful to him for agreeing to spare Dirk and Delia.

From there, Bezewanst and Veronica had been deposed, which earned me a warm welcome from Elvira and the rest of her family. My adoption had given me much greater access to books—a nice development, to be sure—but being taken from my loved ones prematurely had caused me so much heartache in the past and present.

And once I was a noble... Wow, did things get hectic.

I'd performed my duties as the High Bishop and the orphanage director and spread printing and paper-making throughout the duchy as the archduke's adopted daughter, all while clinging to what little remained of my connection to my lower-city family. I'd also gathered jureve ingredients from the provinces on the side of performing religious ceremonies. In the meantime, Ferdinand returned to noble society, Damuel fell in love, Wilfried made a lot of stupid decisions, and I ended up with a cute little sister.

Though I never thought trying to rescue Charlotte would end with me in a two-year coma...

I was thrown into the Royal Academy almost immediately after waking up. Even now, I regretted troubling Solange with my quest to found my very own library committee, though I still maintained that getting all the first-years to pass every one of their lessons on the first day wasn't "going way too far" or "traumatizing a generation."

In hindsight, it felt like most of my Royal Academy memories involved being summoned by the royal family or playing ditter with Dunkelfelger. I suspected that really was the case.

Personally, I would have much rather spent my time with Hirschur, making magic tools to benefit my library. How did it all go so wrong?

My other key memories included seeing Ferdinand depart for Ahrensbach by royal decree, circling the Academy's shrines and translating ancient documents at the royal family's command, and obtaining the Book of Mestionora. A lot of the royals' demands had irritated me to no end, but they had given me everything I needed to save Ferdinand, foil Georgine's plot, and stop Lanzenave from conquering Yurgenschmidt.

Hopefully, I can fill the holes in my Book soon.

Ferdinand had told me to wait until I came of age, but I wanted to complete my Book of Mestionora as quickly as I could.

"Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said, indicating where I should stand. Her voice pulled me from my thoughts just in time for me to realize we'd reached the bottom of the stage. We climbed the stairs to join her.

A short distance away from the Zent hung tapestries bearing the crests of all the new duchies. Trauerqual and Sigiswald stood in front of theirs with their respective wives and retainers. The archducal couples alone now wore capes of their new duchies' colors.

I see Blumenfeld chose ash gray while Korinthsdaum went with brownish red.

Ferdinand and I were engaged, not married, which meant only I would receive a new cape for the inauguration. I moved away from him and knelt before Eglantine.

"I, Zent Eglantine, acknowledge you as Aub Alexandria."

"That cannot be!" came a shout from the audience. "How can a minor be inaugurated as an aub?! There's no precedent for this!"

The floodgates opened, and more dissatisfied cries rang out. Eglantine wore a troubled expression, while the Sovereign knights and scholars around her all grimaced.

"I *am* the precedent," I called. "Please continue, Zent Eglantine. No matter their complaints, my duchy's foundation belongs to me. *I* am Aub Alexandria."

"Indeed, it was the people's decision to let minors obtain schtappes that enabled you to achieve so much in the first place," Eglantine replied with a graceful chuckle. She retrieved a navy blue cape from a box one of the scholars was carrying and spread it out for all to see. Then she draped it over my shoulders and said, "Behold, Alexandria's color!"

I put one hand on the cape to keep it in place and stood. Lieseleta quickly approached, took my registration brooch and some decorative cords from her box, and got to work securing the cape around my neck.

"Behold, Alexandria's crest!" Eglantine called, debuting it while I waited for

Lieseleta to finish. Sovereign scholars held up the crested tapestry while Hartmut explained the logic behind its design.

“To encapsulate the library city Lady Rozemyne hopes to create, the crest relies heavily on books and library magic tools. Because the duchy’s country gate is associated with Darkness, the crest also includes the God of Darkness’s cape, and—”

His words invited further complaints.

“She might have achieved a lot as the avatar of a goddess, but is that really enough to make her an aub?”

“No longer is she an avatar or anyone of note. I sense none of the divine power she exuded during the transference ceremony.”

“I see no reason to believe that someone who has yet to even graduate from the Royal Academy will make a good aub.”

Once my cape was secure, I glanced at the nobles in an uproar and then extended a hand to Ferdinand. He took it with a dark smile and escorted me to the tapestry.

“More nobles are displeased with your ascension than I expected, but I am pleased to see how little it disturbs you,” he said.

“If anything, I pity them for wandering straight into your trap. I suspect you hid the news of my inauguration so that any outraged duchies would make their complaints known, outing themselves as opponents for you to deal with later. Believe it or not, I see right through you.”

I noticed barely any complaints from Ehrenfest, Dunkelfelger, and the greater duchies, all of which had connections to the royal family and understood the circumstances behind my inauguration. Those kicking up a fuss were exclusively from middle-and bottom-ranking duchies.

“Hmm... Do you have a means of silencing them?” Ferdinand asked.

“Of course. I need only show them the truth. Hartmut, the sound-amplifying magic tool, if you would.”

I took a few steps forward, separating from Ferdinand. Hartmut eagerly borrowed the tool that I wanted from a Sovereign scholar and positioned it near my mouth so I wouldn't need to hold it.

Eglantine looked concerned. I smiled reassuringly at her, then turned to the audience and took a deep breath.

"My inauguration as Aub Alexandria has nothing to do with my returning the Grutrissheit to Yurgenschmidt as the avatar of a goddess. I invaded Ahrensbach and stole its foundational magic. That makes me its archduchess. Any decent noble should understand that much, correct?"

Our audience must not have believed that I'd already stolen the duchy's foundation through my own power. Now that I'd cleared up their confusion, the number of upset voices more or less halved.

"Furthermore," I said, looking around with the same fake smile that Ferdinand always wore, "though some of you seem concerned about a mere student carrying out the duties of an aub, I shall put your minds at ease..."

I waited until all eyes were on me, then slowly raised my hand.

"*Grutrissheit!*"

Upon seeing the Book of Mestionora in my hand, even more nobles oblivious to the circumstances let out cries of surprise.

"My divine power might have faded, but I still possess a Grutrissheit," I said. "As I understand it, I know more about Yurgenschmidt than any other aub."

The complaining nobles fell silent. Contented, I instructed Hartmut to go back to his post; I no longer needed a sound-amplifying magic tool. I returned to Ferdinand and stuck out my chest with pride.

"See? Silencing them was trivial."

"Indeed. Very good," Ferdinand replied, awarding me the highest praise he could bestow.

Eglantine retrieved the sound-amplifying tool from Hartmut and addressed the gathered nobles: "During a recent trip to Alexandria, I confirmed that Lady Rozemyne can perform all the magic an aub must know, from casting entwickeln to destroying medals. For matters that demand more experience, she can depend upon Lord Ferdinand, whom she will marry in accordance with the old royal decree. As you all know, he excelled at supporting his previous fiancée in Old Ahrensbach.”

Having made it clear that my rule would pose no problems, she raised a hand and said, “May Yurgenschmidt’s first underage aub be blessed!”

The nobles in the auditorium raised their schtappes, the tips of which started to glow. Ferdinand smirked as he watched the lights move around in celebration of the country’s first underage aub.

“You are now an archduchess,” he said. “Never again will anything precious be taken from you.”

It was strange to think I’d once been the daughter of a soldier with nothing to my name. Now I was an aub with my own Book of Mestionora and complete authority over the Zent. I would concentrate everything and everyone I cared about in Alexandria, where I wielded the power to stop anyone who wished to steal from me. The ring on my left hand started to shine as joy—and, at last, freedom—welled up from within me.

“I shall bless you all in turn!” I cried.

I thrust my left hand up into the air while clutching my Book of Mestionora with my right. The delight felt by Yurgenschmidt’s first *commoner-born* underage aub became a blue light that spread throughout the auditorium.

Epilogue

Summer in Alexandria was much, *much* hotter than Lutz was used to. The season was almost over—according to the calendar, at least—but he'd yet to see even the first signs of autumn. As far as he and the others from Ehrenfest were concerned, the intense heat was here to stay.

It was the last Fireday of summer. The commoners' coming-of-age ceremonies took place in the temple at the end of each season, and it was finally Lutz's turn to attend. His boss, Benno, and fiancée, Tuuli, had seen him off in place of his family.

Master Benno told me I could delay my move and come of age in Ehrenfest, but, well...

At the end of spring, when the Gutenbergs were all moving, Benno had pulled Lutz aside and said, "Lady Rozemyne's shown you some consideration. How would you feel about staying in Ehrenfest to celebrate your coming-of-age with your family? You can join us in Alexandria when you're done." Her concern made sense—her family meant so much to her—but Lutz had turned the proposal down in an instant. A new store's first days in a new duchy were too crucial to miss.

Lutz's mother had sighed in disappointment when she heard the news. "I'm not worried, since you're gonna have Tuuli and Gunther with you, but still... I wanted to be there for your wedding."

"He's a man now!" his father had declared, clapping his son on the back. "He's not gonna run from his duties!"

"Gah, this temple's too big! Couldn't even see inside with all these people everywhere! Lutz, how was it?!"

No sooner had Lutz come out of the temple than Gunther grabbed him by the shoulders and started shaking him. An observer might assume he was there to celebrate, but he actually wanted to see Rozemyne, who had overseen the ceremony as the duchy’s High Bishop. Lutz had understood that from the start, of course; he was just as exasperated as the rest of Gunther’s family.

“Come on, Dad!” Tuuli exclaimed. “This is Lutz’s coming-of-age ceremony! At least congratulate him a little!”

“She’s right,” Effa concurred. “Didn’t we promise to celebrate for Deid and Karla? Lutz, congratulations on coming of age.”

Lutz couldn’t help but sigh as Gunther, ever the devoted father, received yet another tongue-lashing. He patted the man on the back and said, “The blessing was just as astounding as all the rumors claimed. I’m not sure how she did it, but blue light spread through the entire temple.”

“She must have wanted to make your ceremony extra special,” Tuuli noted with a giggle. She moved to stand with her fiancé and wrapped her arm around his. “Let’s go home.”

Kamil, dressed in the clothes of a Plantin Company apprentice, stayed on Lutz’s other side. “The temple’s blessings are huge whenever there’s a Gutenberg in attendance,” he stated with a proud grin. “I ran an errand to a smithy the other day, and the people there said Zack’s Starbinding was something else.” He had the same hair color as his ostensibly late elder sister but didn’t much resemble her otherwise. His brown eyes and other features were a lot more reminiscent of Gunther, their father.

As the trio, Effa, and Gunther departed, Mark and Benno followed along behind them. They wouldn’t normally have gone to the trouble of visiting the temple just because one of their employees was coming of age, but Lutz had moved away from home for work, so they were acting as his guardians. They had taken advantage of the occasion and spent the ceremony speaking with all the gathered parents, obtaining information and getting their names out there.

“Well, thanks to Lady Rozemyne fighting back foreign barbarians and constructing her new city with the commoners’ input, we’re gonna have an easier time working here than if we’d gone anywhere else,” Benno said. “Be grateful, Kamil.”

“Right, Master Benno.”

Alexandria’s country gate was shut, and its trade routes with Lanzenave were no more, so even old and established merchants were desperate to get involved with the aub’s new industry. The Gutenbergs had been welcomed into the city with almost no resistance as a result. It had taken the Plantin Company less than a season to secure a crucial role in negotiations with the duchy’s temple and castle; the local merchants were so used to dealing with the previous nobles that they had no idea how to connect with Rozemyne.

Though I’d guess the noble scholars here are just as confused.

Since her move to Alexandria, Rozemyne rarely attended meetings with merchants; an aub couldn’t just travel to the lower city whenever she wanted. Hartmut was always present, though, which had made it exceptionally easy for the Plantin Company to work its magic.

“I get how much she achieved, but is Lady Rozemyne not way too popular with the commoners for someone who just got here?” Kamil asked. “I’ve heard the fishermen are at odds over who gets to send her fish. I don’t remember anything like that happening in Ehrenfest...”

Lutz nodded, thinking back to what he’d seen. The Gutenbergs were accepted everywhere they went partly because the commoners were so grateful to their new archduchess, who was said to have cast some kind of “awesome magic” across the duchy.

“They’re fighting over her at the port?” Tuuli chuckled. “You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve heard at work. People say the archduchess lit up the night sky with a huge magic circle, which then covered the entire duchy with light. The very next morning, the ocean was clear and teeming with fish, the earth had gone from muddy to green, and there were plants growing everywhere. Everyone says to me, ‘You’re her personnel. It’s such a shame you didn’t get to see it.’”

“Yeah... It sounds absurd, no matter how many times we hear about it.”

Everyone laughed, and it wasn’t long before they arrived outside the Plantin and Gilberta Companies. The stores were right next to each other in a part of the city not too far from the temple. It was easy to see how well the new aub treated her personnel, especially when the Gutenbergs’ carpentry and ink workshops and smithy were all situated in the heart of the artisan district.

Some locals claim that nobles came by to make sure the stores and workshops had proper doors and windows.

The locals all thought it was crazy for nobles to go to such trouble, but not Lutz—the nobles he knew went wherever they wanted, even to the orphanage and its workshop. Rozemyne had assigned knights to protect him and the other Gutenbergs on their move, so if she gave the order, there was nothing strange about nobles checking on their future homes.

“Come on up when you’re all changed,” Effa said. “We’re having a celebratory lunch.”

Benno and Mark smiled and nodded. Lutz couldn’t celebrate with his own parents, who had stayed in Ehrenfest, so he planned to eat together with his fiancée’s family and his guardians.

“You can’t wear clothes this fancy for lunch,” Tuuli said, releasing Lutz’s arm and stroking his sleeve. “Imagine what Mrs. Karla would say if you spilled something on them.”

Lutz agreed. His mom had worked especially hard to make and embroider his coming-of-age clothes with Tuuli, saying they were “the last thing I can do for my son!” He didn’t want to risk staining them.

The group split up to prepare for lunch. Benno, Mark, Lutz, and Tuuli went to the second floors of their respective stores, while Gunther, Effa, and Kamil returned home to the Gilberta Company’s third floor. They reconvened at Gunther’s house when everyone was appropriately dressed, enjoyed their celebratory meal, and then shared some relaxing tea while Effa and Tuuli cleared away the dishes.

This should have been Myne’s coming-of-age ceremony too...

Lutz ran a hand through his hair while pondering the day’s events. Rozemyne should have been among the new adults getting blessed, not up on the stage as the High Bishop. She was the same age as Lutz, but because she’d needed to be rebaptized as a noble to become the archduke’s adopted daughter, she was seen as being a year younger than was actually the case. Considering that nobles had their coming-of-age ceremonies at the end of winter, this meant Rozemyne wouldn’t be a proper adult for another year and a half, even though she and Lutz had once been baptized together.

“I guess Tuuli and Lutz’s wedding is the next ceremony Lady Rozemyne’s gonna heap with blessings,” Kamil said. “Should we start preparing for the big day?”

“No way!” Gunther yelped. “I don’t even wanna think about it!”

“C’mon, Dad. Give it up. Tuuli was gonna schedule their marriage for next year, right? But if Lady Rozemyne plans to spread the printing industry all throughout Alexandria, that means Lutz might need to travel around the duchy as he did in Ehrenfest. They should sort out their wedding before then.”

“He’s right,” Benno said. He and Mark were covering their mouths, trying to hide their smiles. “Expanding the printing industry was the very reason we were brought here. Lutz will need to travel all over with the other Gutenbergs, but if you state your plans first, Lady Rozemyne should accommodate them. She did for Zack when he needed it.”

Before anyone could respond, they heard the *clack* of a door being unlocked and opened. It wasn’t the door to the room they were sitting in, but the noise was loud enough that it couldn’t have come from another building.

Lutz and the others exchanged worried glances.

“That wasn’t the front door, was it?”

“And everyone’s here... right?”

Gunther stood up and quietly approached the door, signaling with his hand for everyone else to get down. Silence fell as tensions rose, making the footsteps of their unknown guests even more obvious. There were two sets—one brisk and cheerful, and the other much heavier, almost like someone was *trying* to announce their presence.

“The coming-of-age ceremony’s over, so they’re bound to be here...” came a voice. “Try not to stomp so loud, will you? We don’t want them to hear us!”

Lutz swallowed the urge to shout, “*You’re* the one making all the noise!” He suddenly recognized the voice, but its owner couldn’t possibly have been there. He looked around at the others, wondering whether anyone else had come to the same strange conclusion.

“We weren’t told about this...” Benno muttered, a distant look in his eyes. Mark seemed just as taken aback.

Gunther, Effa, and Tuuli all stared at one another, their mouths slightly agape. They knew exactly who was speaking, but that didn’t make it any more believable. Kamil was the only one without a clue what was going on.

The doorknob turned, and the door burst open.

“I’m home, everyone! It’s me—Myne!”

In the doorway stood a young woman whose beauty must have come from the gods themselves. Her eyes like golden moons were brimming with emotion, and her hair as dark as the night sky bore two ornaments: a floral hairpin from Tuuli and an accessory with sparkling rainbow stones. Nothing could tarnish her appeal... except her completely outrageous behavior. It really was Myne, no matter how one looked at it.

“I *would* say welcome back, but...” Lutz paused. “Wait! Are you allowed to use that name?! What about the contract magic?!”

Everyone else was too stunned to speak. They opened and closed their mouths, but no words came out.

“Eheheh...” Myne laughed smugly. “That magic contract we signed was only duchy-wide. It doesn’t apply here in Alexandria. And now that I’m the archduchess, I’m obviously not going to remake it.”

“Seriously...?”

Still, no one else spoke.

“You aren’t as surprised as I expected...” Myne said, her head cocked to one side. “I thought I’d get a ‘Whoa!’ or maybe a ‘Who the heck are you?!’”

“We heard you stomping and shouting before you came in.”

“Wait, really?!” Myne looked around, then puffed out her cheeks and spun on her heel to face the doorway. “You ruined the surprise! I told you they were going to hear your stomping!”

“It was *your* voice that alerted them,” said someone outside the room.

What?!

Lutz couldn’t believe his ears. Gunther, Effa, and Tuuli exchanged yet another look of complete and utter shock.

“Is that *Lord Ferdinand*?!” Gunther choked. “But... why?!”

Myne beckoned an expressionless Ferdinand to come out from behind the door. She held on to his sleeve and stood close to him, blushing bright red and gazing aimlessly around the room as she tried to find the right words.

“Well, um... The truth is...”

Myne didn’t need to explain it; the sweetness in the air spoke for her. Gunther cradled his head and sighed at the sight of his youngest daughter’s embarrassment, while Effa and Tuuli looked at each other and shrugged, no longer wary about having Ferdinand in their home.

“You chose Ferdinand,” Benno said, speaking in his natural voice instead of the one he used when conversing with nobles. “We already know.”

Kamil was still clueless, wearing an expression that seemed to scream, “What the heck is going on here?!”

“Bwuh?! How do *you* know that, Benno?!” Myne exclaimed. “We haven’t informed the commoners yet!”

“Tuuli told me; then I told everyone else,” Lutz said.

“THEN HOW DOES TUULI KNOW?!”

Lutz turned to his fiancée, indicating that she should explain. Her shock had already turned into exasperation, and she shook her head with a heavy sigh.

“You told me back when I received the order for Lady Hannelore’s hairpin, remember? You said you had feelings for Lord Ferdinand, that you wouldn’t mind a political marriage with him, and that being like family was the same as being a couple...”

Lutz was shocked and, in truth, somewhat moved. He’d assumed that Myne would only ever have an eye for books.

“No, wait! You’re not playing fair!” Myne cried. “I might have said something along those lines, but you’re forgetting some very important context!”

“It was close enough. And you wouldn’t get hung up on a little inconsistency or two, right?”

“A small change can have a tremendous impact!” Myne protested, looking between Tuuli and Ferdinand while groaning that she hadn’t said anything of the sort.

Ferdinand was still as stone-faced as when he’d arrived, making it tough to pinpoint what he thought about the whole situation. Myne, in contrast, looked entirely like a young lady in love. It was almost comical. Lutz couldn’t believe that she, of all people, was smitten.

Not bad, Ferdinand...

“Hmm? You say it’s all a mistake, but you *are* marrying him, aren’t you?”

“I mean, yes, but... It hadn’t been decided yet! And again, you totally misunderstood me!”

“Really?” Tuuli asked, unperturbed. “Well, you got engaged in the end, so it’s fine.”

Myne glared at her sister, clutching her bright red cheeks. “N-No, it’s not fine! That makes it sound entirely like I’m in love with him! Why does nobody believe me when I say we’re not like that?!”

Uh... The heck is she even saying?

Myne was clearly in love with Ferdinand. Everyone could see it. Mark and Benno were watching the couple with warm smiles. Tuuli seemed exasperated, but there was a teasing light in her eyes. Effa was covering her mouth in an attempt to stifle her laughter, while Gunther was covering both ears and almost weeping as he tried to avoid the truth.

Man, he’s gonna be so *annoying later.*

Lutz thought back to how Gunther had acted when he and Tuuli got engaged and slumped over, already exhausted. The sisters continued their back-and-forth in the meantime.

“Oh, really? Does that mean you *hate* Lord Ferdinand?”

“Obviously not.”

“So you love him.”

“W-Well... yes, but not in *that* sense.”

In what sense, then?

Lutz retorted, but only in his head; he knew that trying to argue with Myne would only lead them around in circles. Tuuli was openly teasing her, in any case, so he decided to leave the sisters to it.

“Fine, fine...” Tuuli muttered. “I get exactly what you mean.”

“You clearly don’t!” Myne snapped with a glare. Lutz could see the tears forming in her golden eyes and thought it might be a good time to stop, but Tuuli pressed the attack.

“Hmm? But I totally do. You don’t hate Ferdinand—you love him so much that you want to marry him.”

“Bwuh?!”

In an instant, Myne went bright red all the way down to her neck. She looked up at Ferdinand, who hadn’t shown even the slightest hint of a reaction, and stammered, “A-Ah... Eep. Th... That’s not wrong... But... No...”

She took a step back, turned around, and attempted to retreat. Her gait was slow and clumsy as she closed in on her target, Kamil, who hadn’t moved an inch from near the door since the two sisters had started their spat. She threw her arms around him and started rubbing her cheek against the top of his head, sobbing all the while.

“Bweeeh... Kamiiil! Tuuli keeps being meeean!”

“Huh? H-Hold on, what?!”

Kamil went as red as Myne, his eyes brimming with tears as he tried to escape her clutches. His panic was only natural; to him, some attractive lady he didn’t know was pressing his face into her chest.

“Wh-What’s going on?! Who are you?! WAAAH! LUTZ! HELP MEEEEEE!”

“Of cooourse you don’t know me—I’m your big sister Myne! Aaah, you’ve grown so big! I’ve wanted to hold you like this for so long. I’m glad to see it still makes you cry!”

You’re... glad...?

Intent on distracting everyone from her embarrassment, Myne kept clinging to her frightened younger brother. Effa and Tuuli watched them with warm smiles.

“Myne, could you let Kamil go now?” Lutz asked. “He’s clearly losing his mind.” It couldn’t have been nice being seized out of nowhere without even a few words of explanation.

“Nuh-uh,” she protested. “This hug was seven years in the making. I’m gonna enjoy it!”

Myne continued rubbing her cheeks against Kamil, who desperately reached out to anyone who might save him. Because his captor was a noble, he hadn’t even tried to shove her away. He was too afraid of the consequences.

“Myne... Kamil still doesn’t know what’s going on,” Lutz said. He gestured to Gunther, who was sobbing over his daughter’s return. “If you want to make up for all the years you’ve lost, there might be a better place to start.”

Myne pursed her lips and released Kamil, though she made it clear that she would come back for him. Then she skipped over to Gunther.

Kamil attempted to neaten his messed-up hair before glaring at Lutz. “Care to tell me what’s going on? How come Master Benno and Mark understand the situation when I’m completely in the dark?”

“There was a magic contract involved,” Lutz began. “Anyone who breached its terms would die, so we all decided it was best not to tell you anything.”

Benno nodded. “Myne became the target of nobles from another duchy. To keep her family from being deemed guilty by association and put to death, she signed a magic contract saying that she would never interact with them as family again and got adopted by the archduke. The contract only worked in

Ehrenfest, though, so she's able to see you as much as she wants. That woman over there is your older sister."

It was a simple explanation, but Kamil mustn't have thought so. He yelled, "None of that makes sense!" as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Well, nobody can blame you for being confused," Benno said. "Myne confuses all of us all the time."

"Indeed," Mark added. "Her actions never seem to make sense, whether one sees them in person or merely hears about them through a report."

Kamil paled. Not even the most reliable people in his store knew what to make of Myne.

"In any case, Kamil, you might want to gather your thoughts; it won't be long before Myne strikes again. Seven years of pent-up love—practically a lifetime to you—is about to hit you all at once. She just said she'd come back for you, right?"

"A *lifetime* of love?!" Kamil asked, barely able to contain his nervousness.

Lutz chuckled. For years, Myne had needed to settle for glimpsing her younger brother during temple ceremonies. Now that they had reunited, she wouldn't hold anything back. Kamil really was at risk.

"Dad, I'm home!" Myne said.

"Welcome back, Myne. It's been too long. Good... Good job making it here." Big tears formed in Gunther's eyes. A long time ago, he'd given up on ever getting to hug his daughter again.

"You can thank Ferdinand. He's helped me so much over the years. He even made the teleportation circle I used to get here."

"Right. Is that so...?"

Effa watched the father-daughter reunion, drying her tears on her apron all the while. Then her attention turned elsewhere as if she'd suddenly realized something. Lutz followed her gaze to Ferdinand, who was completely focused on Myne and Gunther. It was hard to tell what the man was thinking at first glance—he was as quiet and as expressionless as always—but the slightest glint in his eye gave him away. This was exactly the outcome he had wanted.

“Myne.”

“Nghhh... Yes, Mom?” Myne asked, sobbing.

Effa was crying too, but she still managed to sound exasperated when she said, “What do you mean, yes? How long are you going to leave your future husband out in the hallway? At least invite him in and introduce him to everyone.”

“Oh, right.”

Myne dashed over to Ferdinand and took him by the arm. He frowned in response.

“No, I do not mind staying here,” he said.

“Nuh-uh.”

Myne... Are you sure Ferdinand wants *to be your husband...?*

Lutz hadn’t seen Ferdinand enough to really know him, but the man’s permanently knit brow made him seem anything but glad to be there. Was it really wise for Myne to hold on to him? She must have thought so because she brought him into the room without a care in the world.

“This is Ferdinand, my fiancé,” she said, her cheeks still wet with tears. “He’s going to protect me and all of Alexandria, like how Dad promised to keep me safe back in Ehrenfest. We’ve already announced our engagement to noble society, but I wanted to introduce him to all of you.”

“Do not get too emotional...” Ferdinand warned as his bride-to-be started to weep again. He took out a handkerchief, used it to dry her eyes, and then touched a feystone to her forehead.

Lutz had served as Myne’s caretaker however long ago, so he recognized the skill with which Ferdinand tended to her. The former High Priest must have had plenty of experience. Lutz almost couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

It doesn’t make sense. He’s wearing such a stony expression... yet there’s such a tender air between them.

"I just... never thought we'd all get to be together again..." Myne said. "I really couldn't be happier."

"I know, but you must contain yourself. May Heilschmerz's healing be granted." Ferdinand put a hand over his fiancée's puffy eyes, which returned to normal in a flash of green light.

She's obviously going to cry more, so why not save the blessings until right before she leaves?

Lutz was still mulling over the thought when Tuuli cried, "Ah! Everyone! Let's hold our own coming-of-age ceremony! One just for Myne! I'll do her hair, and we can celebrate together! Let me just fetch my things!"

She rushed out of the room, trying to hide her tears.

"Tuuli sure seems motivated," Gunther said, taking some mugs from a cupboard and shaking them a little. "How about it, Myne? Do you have time?"

"Umm, Ferdinand...?" she pleaded.

He paused in thought. "We must return by sixth bell, but we may remain here until then." It wasn't even fifth bell, so they had more time than Lutz had expected.

"Mark, can you fetch some fruit wine and such from our place?" Benno asked, evidently intent on participating. "Let's break out the special stock we brought from Ehrenfest."

"At once, Master Benno. Given the occasion, I will also bring the Alexandrian spirits we intended to open tonight. Kamil, would you come with me?"

"Yes, Mr. Mark," Kamil replied, seizing the first opportunity to escape.

"I'm back!" Tuuli announced. She plopped a box of brushes and such on the table with a dull *thump* and gestured to a stool. "Take a seat, Myne. I'll do your hair. Oh, but only the parts that are hanging loose; I can see you've got gel around your hair ornaments to keep them in place."

Myne patted the chair beside her and smiled. "Come sit here, Ferdinand."

Ferdinand seemed reluctant, but he sat down nonetheless. Effa poured him some tea to tide him over until the alcohol arrived, but Myne swiped the cup from him and took the first sip.

“Myne!” Effa cried, unable to believe her daughter’s rudeness.

Myne wiped the rim of the teacup before setting it back down on the table. “There you go, Ferdinand. You can drink it now.”

“That was not necessary...” Ferdinand replied.

“Really?”

Lutz knew a thing or two about noble customs from Myne’s days as a blue shrine maiden, so he understood that she’d just tested the drink for poison. Seeing her go to such lengths in her own home without the slightest hesitation made Lutz realize just how much she had changed over the years.

“Okay. Go ahead,” Myne said. She turned away from Tuuli and swept back the hair hanging over her shoulders.

Tuuli ran a hand through Myne’s dark-blue tresses. “Wow! Your hair’s so pretty! And it feels amazing to touch!”

“Right, right? You can thank my attendants for all their hard work.”

“You should have said it was because of our rinsham...” Tuuli muttered, her lips pursed.

Myne clapped her hands together. “Oh, right! There’s now a rinsham workshop here in Alexandria, right? How’s the quality compared to the rinsham sold in Ehrenfest? I meant to ask ages ago, but I can’t just waltz into the lower city nowadays.”

Tuuli started doing Myne’s hair while the pair discussed rinsham and the Gilberta Company. Benno slipped into the conversation as well, always eager to talk business.

“We were told to keep advancing the printing industry, right?” he asked. “How’s your plan going so far? How many printing workshops are you gonna make in this one city?”

“I want two outside the orphanage’s workshop, at least for the time being. I assume you’ve heard that I plan to start a school of sorts in the orphanage. It should open sometime after the autumn baptism ceremony and will serve as a primer on the information taught at the Royal Academy."

Fran and Zahm's move meant Alexandria's temple would soon be restructured to match the one in Ehrenfest. Lutz had heard that the classroom would also educate the children of major stores.

"Yes, I plan to send Kamil there," Benno replied. "Right now, most major stores don't know how to deal with the new nobles. Interest in your school is pretty low as most merchants worry the kids might slip up and cost them some valuable connections."

The temple's classes were cheap to attend, but most merchants had decided the risk was too great. Both the Plantin and Gilberta Companies were getting new leherls from Alexandria, and Lutz suspected that other stores would watch to see what became of them before making moves of their own.

"Aah, this sucks..." Myne groaned. "I wish I could go see the classrooms. Maybe I should take a page from Sylvester's book and start sneaking around."

"Don't even think about it, idiot!" Lutz and Benno barked in unison.

Lutz heaved a deep and somewhat over-the-top sigh. He recalled Aub Ehrenfest sneaking into the lower city's forest, Justus wanting to join the Rozemyne Workshop, and Hartmut trying to spread tales of his saint's grandeur to the commoners, then concluded that he'd dealt with more than enough wackos for one lifetime. Learning that Myne hadn't changed at all just made his head ache.

"Good grief. Truly...?" Ferdinand asked, his brow creased. Lutz was relieved to know Myne had *someone* in her inner circle to guide her and scold her when she needed it. "Do you not realize that you are, in fact, sneaking out at this very moment?"

"Oh, you're right. Call me Rozevester."

She came here in secret...? Huh. Ferdinand must have permitted it.

As the mood started to relax, Lutz realized something—wasn't it strange that Ferdinand was allowing Myne to sneak out? And now that he thought about it, though he remained stone-faced, the former High Priest hadn't looked away from her even once since his arrival. He was even watching her get her hair done.

Could this be pretty dangerous?

Unease spread through Lutz's chest. Myne had received permission to be there, which meant it probably wouldn't be the last time she abruptly made an appearance. He exchanged a look with Benno, worried about what kind of nightmarish future awaited them.

"I created a huge library here in Alexandria," Myne said. "Its meager collection is sad to see. I want the Plantin Company to make lots and lots of books. Like, a *ton*. Do your best to help me, Lutz! Together, we can put a stop to all those empty shelves!"

Benno looked into Myne's golden eyes and shook his head. "Not happening. Lutz won't be going anywhere for a year or two, so plan around that. He and Tuuli are getting married soon."

Lutz and Tuuli had purposefully kept their engagement a secret from Myne, but alas, Benno had revealed the truth without a second thought. Myne stared at Lutz, wide-eyed, and then attempted to whip her head around to see Tuuli.

"Stay still, Myne! I'm trying to do your hair!"

"You and Lutz are *engaged* now?! How come nobody told me?!"

"We were waiting for the right moment," Tuuli said, exasperated. "We didn't want you to overwhelm us with blessings."

Lutz agreed. For quite a while, they had only been able to speak with Myne during their meetings at the temple. Reporting the news on one of those occasions might have led to her blessing Lutz and Tuuli right in front of all the gathered scholars.

"So it's true, then?!" Myne exclaimed. "Oh, gosh, what can I do?! I'm so overjoyed for you both! PRAISE BE—!"

"STOP, FOOL!" Ferdinand shouted. "If you unleash the light of a blessing here, then you will never be able to come back!"

"I... I don't want that! Aah, but I want to bless them!"

"Save it for the day of their wedding. Letizia could do with the demonstration.

Since a member of your family is getting married, I will provide a blessing as well.”

According to Ferdinand, Alexandria’s nobles were being taught to pray on a daily basis, meaning Myne’s prayers wouldn’t cause any issues no matter how crazy she went with them. Lutz wanted to sit with his head in his hands; he could already tell that an immense blessing awaited him on his wedding day.

But, uh... if I marry Tuuli, and Ferdinand marries Myne, won’t that make the two of us family? That’s... something.

Lutz had already known that Rozemyne and Ferdinand were getting married, but he hadn’t expected *Myne* to return. Only then had it occurred to him that he was going to have a full-blooded noble in his family. His brain more or less shut down when he tried to wrap his head around it.

And if Ferdinand treats me as family, then I need to do the same for him. Can I really manage that...?

Mark and Kamil soon returned with alcohol and snacks, while Gunther ran back and forth between his home and the Plantin Company to get the celebration ready. Effa prepared some extra snacks while half watching Tuuli do Myne’s hair.

“Done!” Tuuli announced. “So, what do you think? Not to blow my own trumpet, but I think I did a pretty fine job!”

Lutz had thought the same thing when his fiancée came of age, but girls looked so much more mature when they wore their hair up. Tuuli gave her sister an appraising look, inspecting her from the back and sides, before declaring the hairstyle to be “extremely cute.”

“Ooh, that’s my Myne!” Gunther exclaimed. “My darling daughter! The cutest young lady in the whole wide world! Just look at you! You’re a beauty like your mom! An adult through and through! I’m so, so glad we did this!”

“Daaad!” Myne replied. “Quit exaggerating!”

“Nah, I mean it! I thought the same thing when I first saw your mom with her hair up, but girls turn into beauties in the blink of an eye! You’re a woman now, Myne!”

Myne laughed, slightly embarrassed by all the praise. She turned to Ferdinand and said, “What do you think? Does this hairstyle make me look like an adult?”

“Indeed,” he replied with a nod. “Not bad.”

“Hold it, *chump*!” Gunther’s eyes flashed with anger as he rested a forearm on the table. “The heck is ‘not bad’ supposed to mean?! My daughter’s the most beautiful girl there is!”

Gunther! Are you insane?!

The blood drained from Lutz’s face. Gunther might have been a loving father, but that was no excuse to insult a noble. Lutz glanced at Ferdinand, whose normally blank expression hadn’t changed at all.

“Gunther. Cool it,” Benno said, rising from his seat.

“Master Benno’s right,” Lutz added, almost leaping to his feet. “You know this is *Lord Ferdinand* you’re speaking to, right?” Both merchants were ready to pin Myne’s father down if they needed to.

“So what?! He stole my daughter’s heart!” Gunther slammed a fist against the table, his fury on full display. “I don’t care if he’s a commoner, a noble, or even a god—if he can’t treat Myne right, I won’t show him any mercy!”

Lutz gasped as tensions rose. He wasn’t sure how to respond.

“That’s my dad for you!” Myne announced with a chuckle. “This is just like him, isn’t it, Ferdinand?”

“Indeed. You and your father truly are alike.” He reached out and stroked her cheek, then turned to Myne’s parents and spoke their names. His expression was as unchanging as always, so Lutz couldn’t even gauge the tone of the conversation.

Effa seemed unfazed, but Gunther was still ready for a fight. Lutz and Benno remained on edge, prepared to intervene at a moment’s notice.

“You both raised Myne with so much love,” Ferdinand said, “and she has saved me in more ways than I can explain. I was touched to see how much you treasure her, even when status and the terms of a magic contract tore you apart. Myne taught me the meaning of family... but it was you who raised and protected her.”

His quiet voice moved everyone who heard it. He wasn’t just being kind to Myne’s parents—he genuinely admired them.

“I wish to cherish and protect her just as you did,” he continued. “I swore to protect this duchy and her with it, and once again, I will vow to treasure Myne above all else. Thus, I... I would ask you both to acknowledge me as a member of your family.”

Ferdinand didn’t want Myne’s family to become nobles. Instead, he was humbly requesting to join them as they were.

Myne watched her parents closely, her golden eyes brimming with blissful tears as she awaited their response. How could they reject someone who brought their daughter so much joy?

“Lord Ferdinand, I was right to entrust Myne to you all those years ago,” Effa said, smiling as she placed a cup between him and her husband. “Gunther, aren’t you relieved that he’s a good person?”

Gunther merely frowned as he accepted a jug from his wife and started pouring its contents into the cup she had put on the table. The cup was only halfway full when he set the jug down and stared at his youngest daughter’s husband-to-be.

Ferdinand turned to Myne as if asking what he should do, but she merely cocked her head at him. Maybe, as nobles, they weren’t used to pouring their own drinks. Or maybe they didn’t understand why there was only one cup on the table.

“Lord Ferdinand, he wants you to pour the rest,” Lutz explained. “It’s something we commoners do for engagements; I went through the same thing with Tuuli. I don’t know how nobles do things, but if you really want to be a part of our lives, I can teach you our customs.”

“You have my thanks,” Ferdinand said. He took the jug and filled the cup with fruit wine, which would serve as proof of their vow.

Gunther picked up the drink, gulped down half, and then held the rest out to Ferdinand. “Take good care of Myne.”

"I shall. I swear it."

Ferdinand accepted the cup and downed the last of the fruit wine, establishing his and Myne's commoner engagement.

Together, everyone celebrated Myne's coming-of-age and engagement. It couldn't have been a more enjoyable occasion.

Benno teasingly insisted that Myne and Ferdinand seal their union with a kiss, throwing Myne into a panic.

Mark turned to Ferdinand and said, "I see that Myne was your Goddess of Water." Ferdinand replied in all seriousness, "Not quite; Myne is every single one of my goddesses," rendering everyone both confused and speechless.

Myne clung to Kamil again and refused to release him, no matter how much he pleaded.

Ferdinand spoke to Gunther about Myne, while the young lady in question discussed clothes with her mom and sister.

Lutz and Tuuli dug through their memories, recounting Myne's ancient history and various stories from her past.

Time really did fly when you were having fun. Sixth bell came sooner than anyone expected, meaning it was time for Myne and Ferdinand to leave.

"Come again when you can," Effa said. "That includes you, Lord Ferdinand."

"But you're bringin' the fruit wine!" Gunther exclaimed, completely soused. He threw an arm over his future son-in-law's shoulder and gave him an enthusiastic noogie.

"Indeed," Ferdinand replied, not bothered in the slightest. "I shall bring some of my special reserves." He seemed as expressionless as ever to Lutz, but Myne assured everyone that he was content and at ease.

"Since you're keeping these visits a secret even from your retainers, I'll say this now: wear these the next time you come." Tuuli produced several outfits appropriate for rich commoners. Myne had worn her most modest clothes for their long-awaited reunion, but they didn't want to risk drawing attention to her.

“Thanks,” Myne replied. “I’ll work hard so that I can come at least once per season.” Her tresses hung freely again—Tuuli had untied them—which made their impromptu coming-of-age ceremony seem like nothing more than a dream.

“Kamil, be ready to call me ‘Big Sis’ the next time I visit,” Myne continued, her tone a little more wistful. “I’m going to look forward to it.”

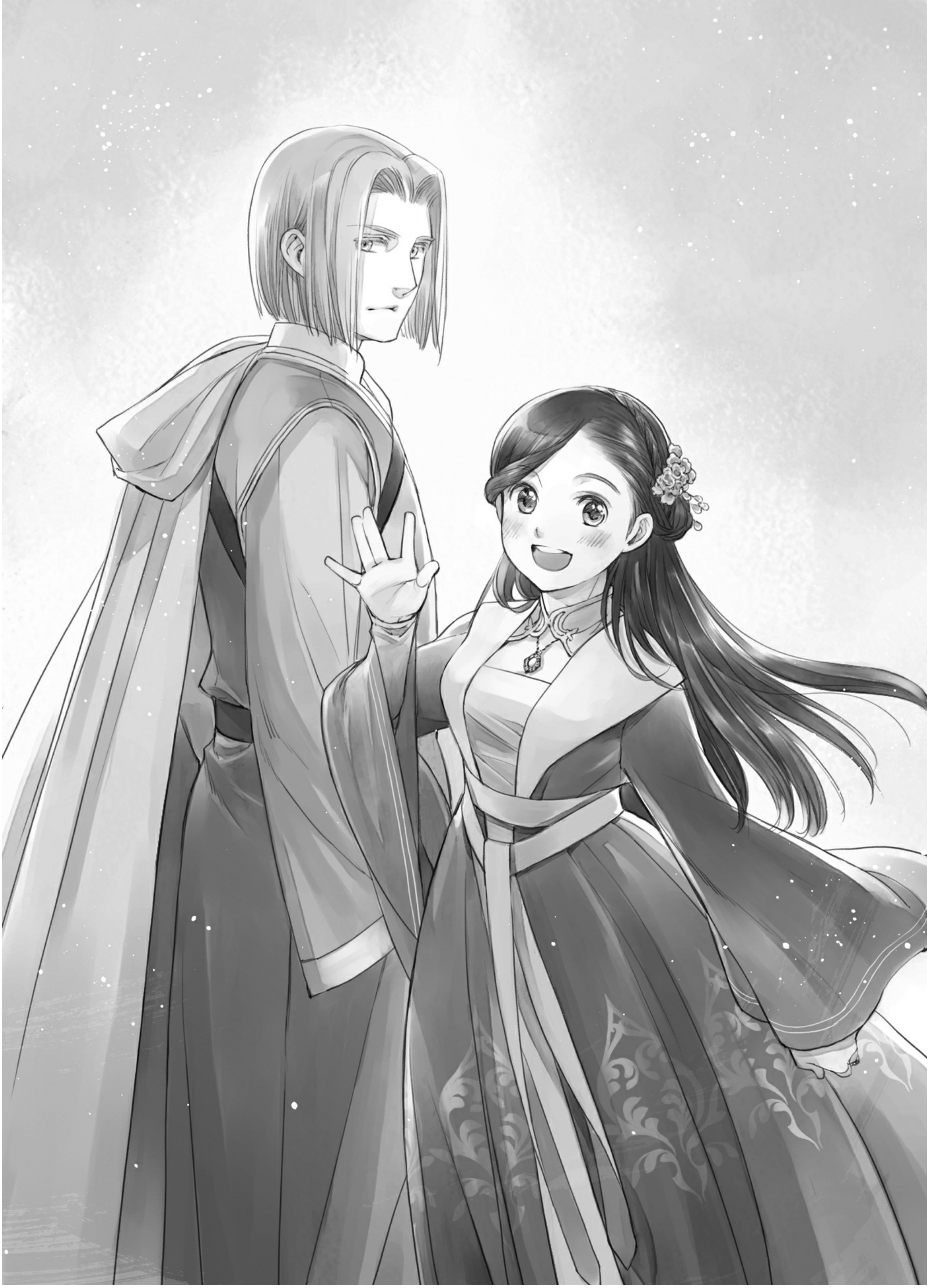
The boy in question popped his head out from behind Lutz. He hadn’t stopped running from Myne since their embrace, but not because he hated her—he just had no idea how to respond to a beautiful older woman appearing out of nowhere and doting on him like a compassionate elder sister.

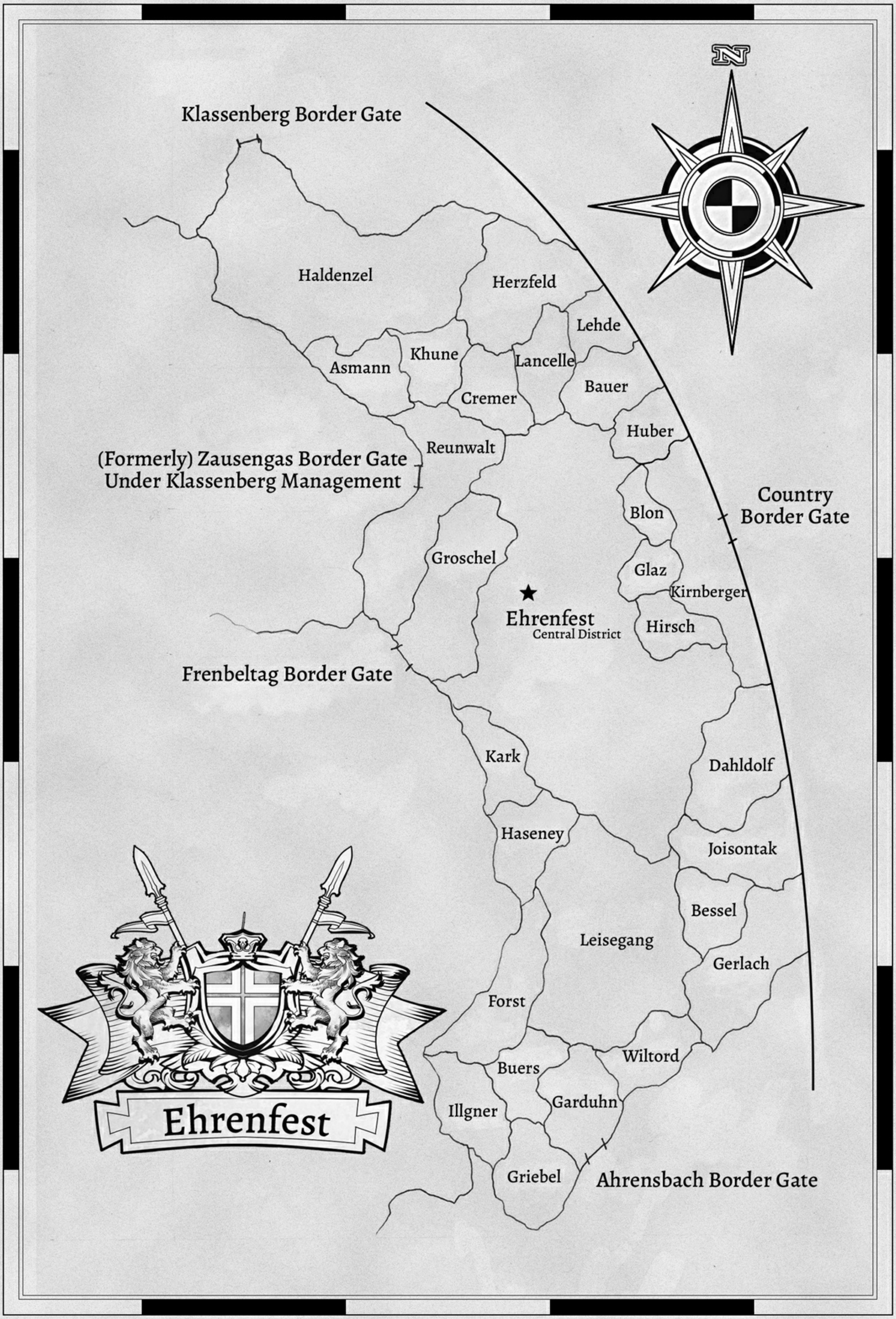
“No way. I’m not a kid...” Kamil protested. “I always call Tuuli by her name, so... Is that okay with you, Myne?”

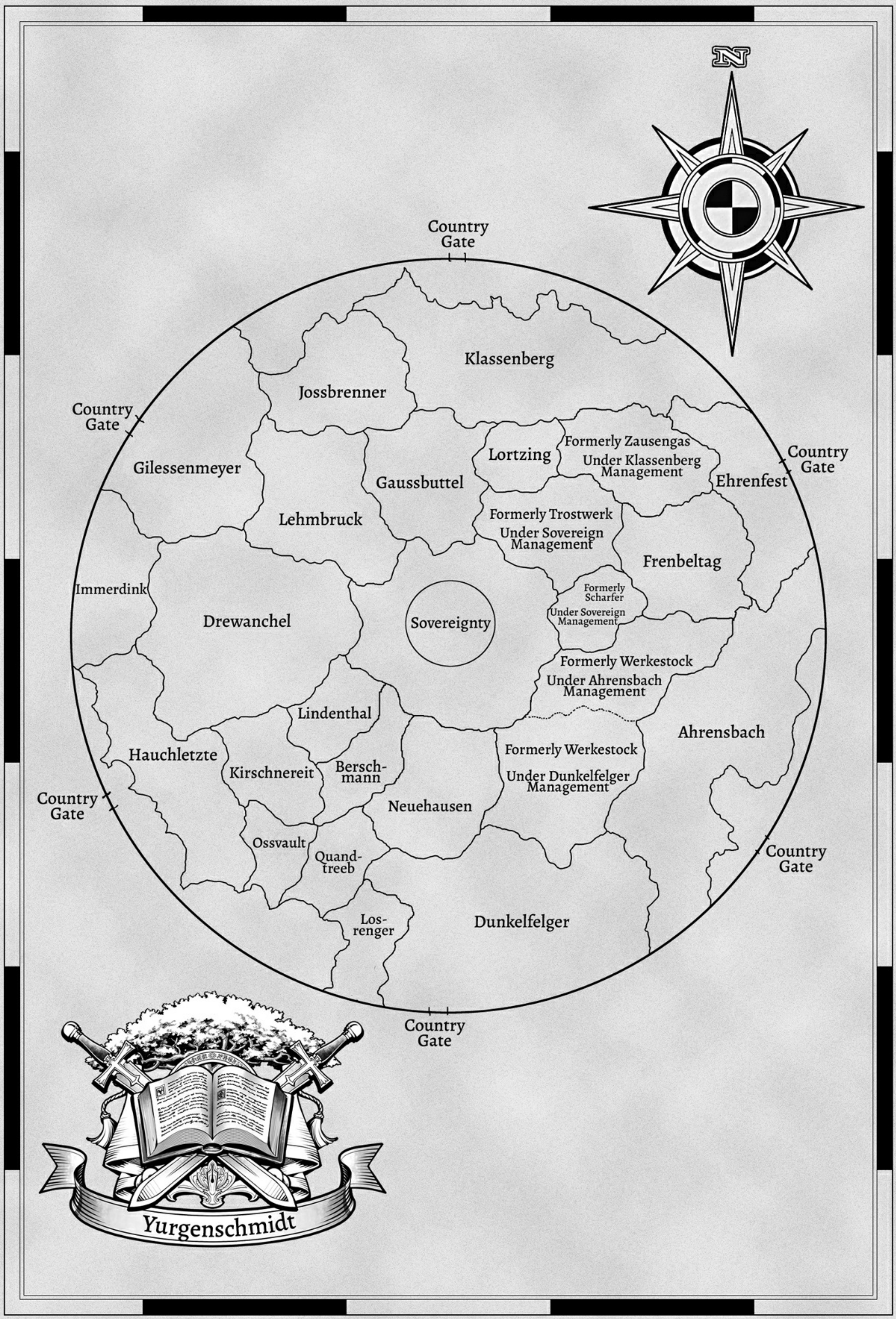
Myne smiled, evidently on board with the idea. She pressed a hand against the wall, and a door opened that certainly hadn’t been there before. It must have been hidden with magic.

“See you later, Myne.”

“Uh-huh. See you later, everyone!”




Klassenberg Border Gate
Haldenzel
Herzfeld
Lehde
Asmann
Khune
Lancelle
Bauer
Cremer
Huber
(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management
Reunwalt
Country
Border Gate
Blon
Groschel
Glaz
Kirnberger
Ehrenfest
Central District
Hirsch
Frenbeltag Border Gate
Kark
Dahldolf
Haseney
Joisontak
Bessel
Leisegang
Gerlach
Forst
Wiltord
Buers
Garduhn
Illgner
Ehrenfest
Griebel
Ahrensbach Border Gate


N
Country Gate
Klassenberg
Jossbrenner
Country Gate
Gilessenmeyer
Gaussbuttel
Lortzing
Formerly Zausengas
Under Klassenberg Management
Country Gate
Ehrenfest
Lehmbruck
Formerly Trostwerk
Under Sovereign Management
Frenbeltag
Immerdink
Drewanchel
Sovereignty
Formerly Scharfer
Under Sovereign Management
Formerly Werkestock
Under Ahrensbach Management
Lindenthal
Hauchletzte
Kirschnereit
Berschmann
Formerly Werkestock
Under Dunkelfelger Management
Ahrensbach
Country Gate
Neuehausen
Ossvault
Quandtreeb
Country Gate
Losrenger
Dunkelfelger
Country Gate
Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

Hello again, it’s Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 12*.

At long last, we’ve reached the end. It’s been ten years since I started publishing this series on Narou; how wonderful that its conclusion aligned with this momentous anniversary. Releasing such a long story has had its challenges. Back when I started working on the novel, I spent my days worrying that it might be canceled midway through, but here we are. Thanks to everyone’s support, we’ve actually done it.

Thank you, everyone. I really couldn’t be happier.

This volume’s prologue focused on Ferdinand. It picked up where the previous volume ended and revealed parts of his negotiation with the Goddess of Wisdom that Rozemyne never witnessed. I hope you enjoyed seeing him panic and whatnot; he would never have revealed those emotions to Rozemyne.

In the main story, Ferdinand showed Rozemyne his memories to help her remember all the people and events she’d forgotten. She got to glimpse his past and see how he viewed previous encounters with the people of the lower city.

Rozemyne eventually regained her memories, and then it was time to prepare the new duchy. There were the entwickeln, Eglantine’s visit, and the engagement ceremony to consider. From there, I added a substantial amount to the story compared to the web novel version. Everything from her return to Ehrenfest to the inauguration ceremony is entirely new.

These new chapters stem from the fact that when I was originally writing this part of the web novel, I was so busy with the light novel adaptation, the manga adaptation, the drama CD, and the upcoming anime that I simply didn’t have the time to write them. Thus, I chose to end the story as soon as I possibly could. I’m so glad that the light novel allowed me to finish the story as I originally intended. So many nostalgic faces from Ehrenfest made a return that the editor and I struggled to decide where to put this volume’s illustrations.

The epilogue was written from Lutz's perspective. The web novel ended with the same chapter, and one could say that I've been building up to it since Part 1. Lutz knew about Myne's connection to her lower-city family and the love she feels for them, so it was from his point of view that I covered her "homecoming," as was the name of the chapter in the web novel.

There were no short stories this time around; the volume was simply too long to include any. This also allowed Rozemyne's story to end on a clean note, so I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. The original short stories that would have been here will instead be featured in the third short story collection. Please look forward to them.

And of course, there's also a five-page comic drawn by Shiina-sama.

As for my future plans, I intend to publish a book version of the side story I'm currently writing on Narou, preemptively titled *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy*. It isn't done yet, so it probably won't be released until sometime next summer.

Then there's the aforementioned third short story collection, which should include all the remaining store-exclusive sales bonus stories. Expect it next winter at the earliest. A lot of people asked me to fully dissect Rozemyne's and Ferdinand's engagement vows, so that's exactly what I plan to do.

I also plan to write a series of what might be considered essays. I'll gather together the columns I've published and make a "Let's Write Novels" seminar for young adults.

This volume's cover art shows Rozemyne's inauguration as Aub Alexandria. At my request, Shiina-san drew it to match the cover art of the very first volume.

The color illustration depicts Myne's grand return. She's clinging to Kamil while Effa, Tuuli, and Lutz watch with smiles. You can see the men all drinking together on the right. There's also an illustration of Rozemyne and Ferdinand as they appeared during their engagement ceremony. Shiina-sama—thank you very much.

And, as always, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book.

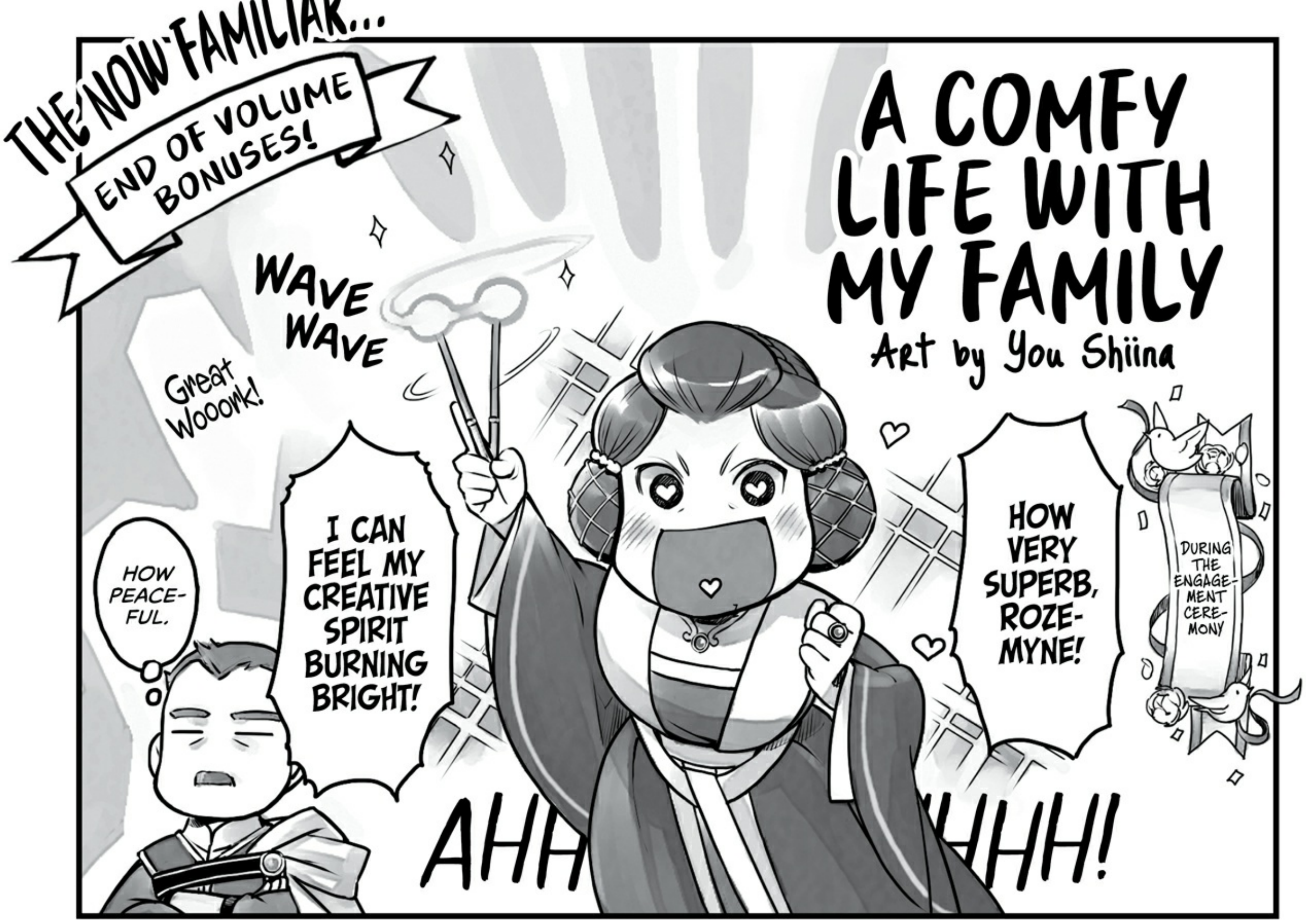
October 2023, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...

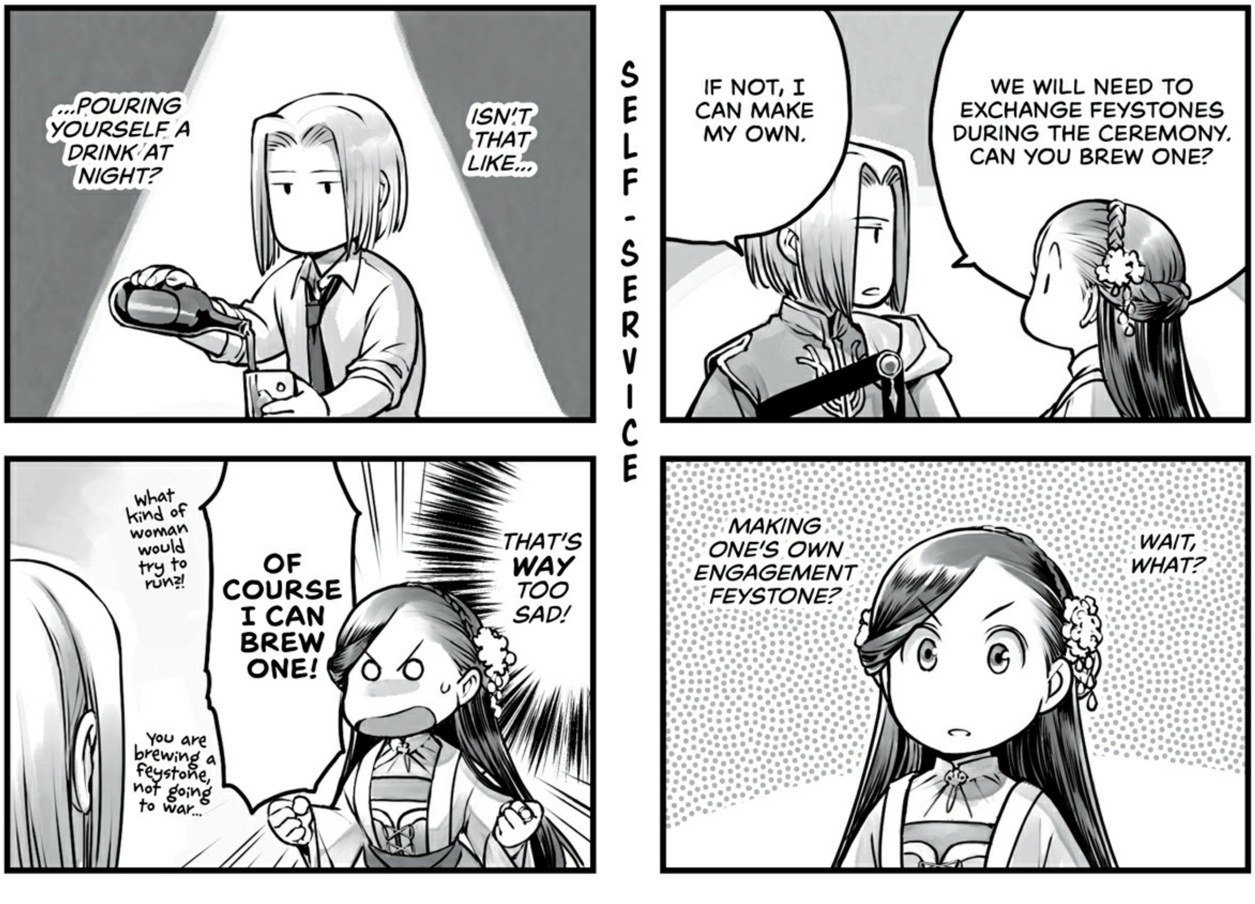
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

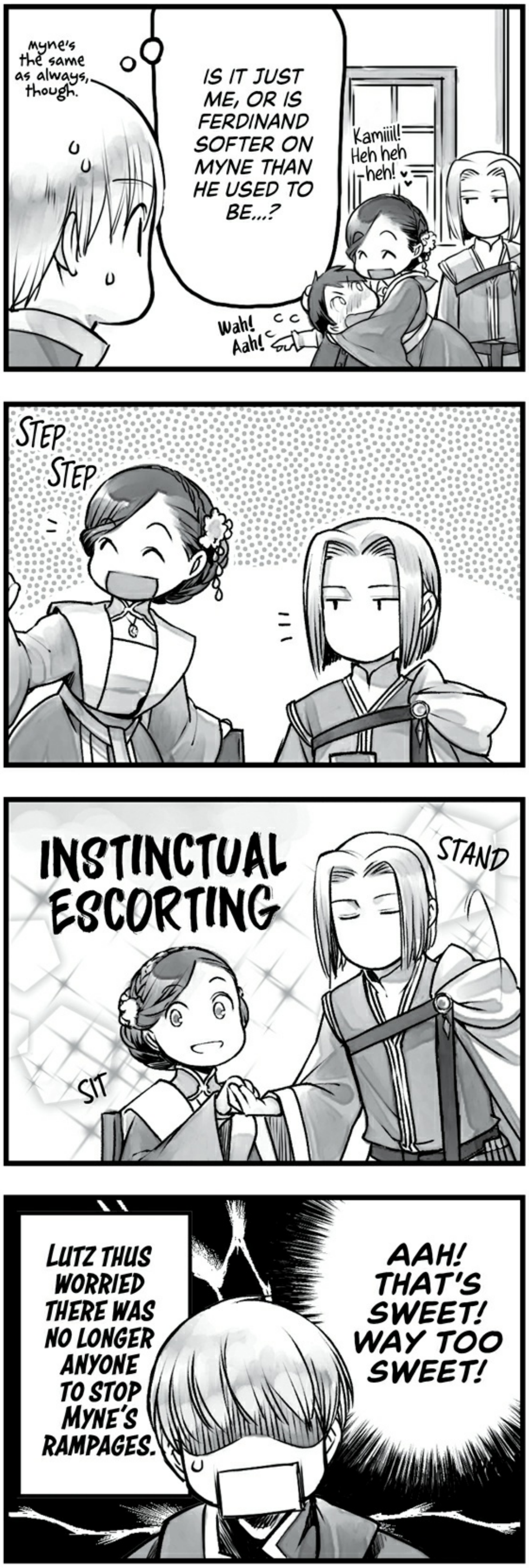
Art by You Shiina


DURING THE ENGAGEMENT CEREMONY
HOW VERY SUPERB, ROZEMYNE!
AHH HHH!
WAVE WAVE
I CAN FEEL MY CREATIVE SPIRIT BURNING BRIGHT!
Great wooork!
HOW PEACEFUL.

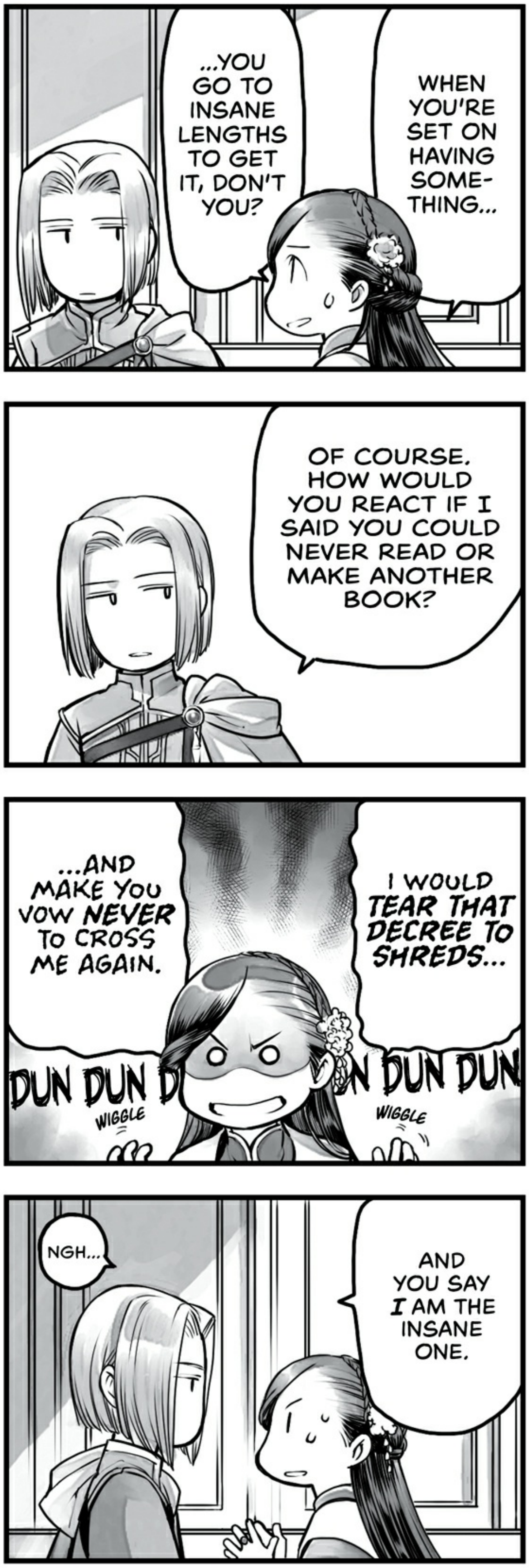
SELF-SERVICE

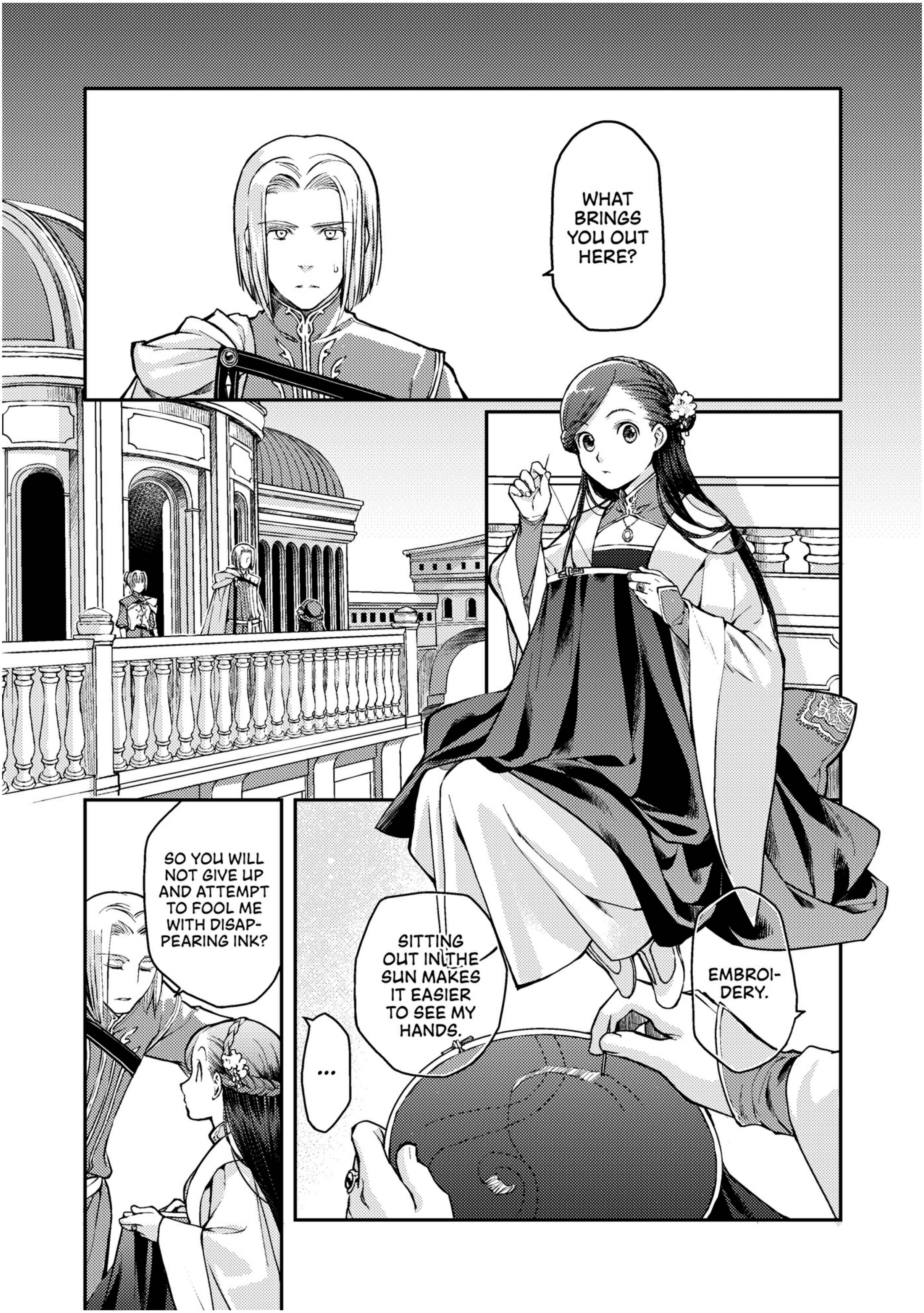

WE WILL NEED TO EXCHANGE FEYSTONES DURING THE CEREMONY. CAN YOU BREW ONE?
IF NOT, I CAN MAKE MY OWN.
WAIT, WHAT?
MAKING ONE'S OWN ENGAGEMENT FEYSTONE?
ISN'T THAT LIKE...
...POURING YOURSELF A DRINK AT NIGHT?
THAT'S WAY TOO SAD!
OF COURSE I CAN BREW ONE!
What kind of woman would try to run?!
You are brewing a feystone, not going to war...

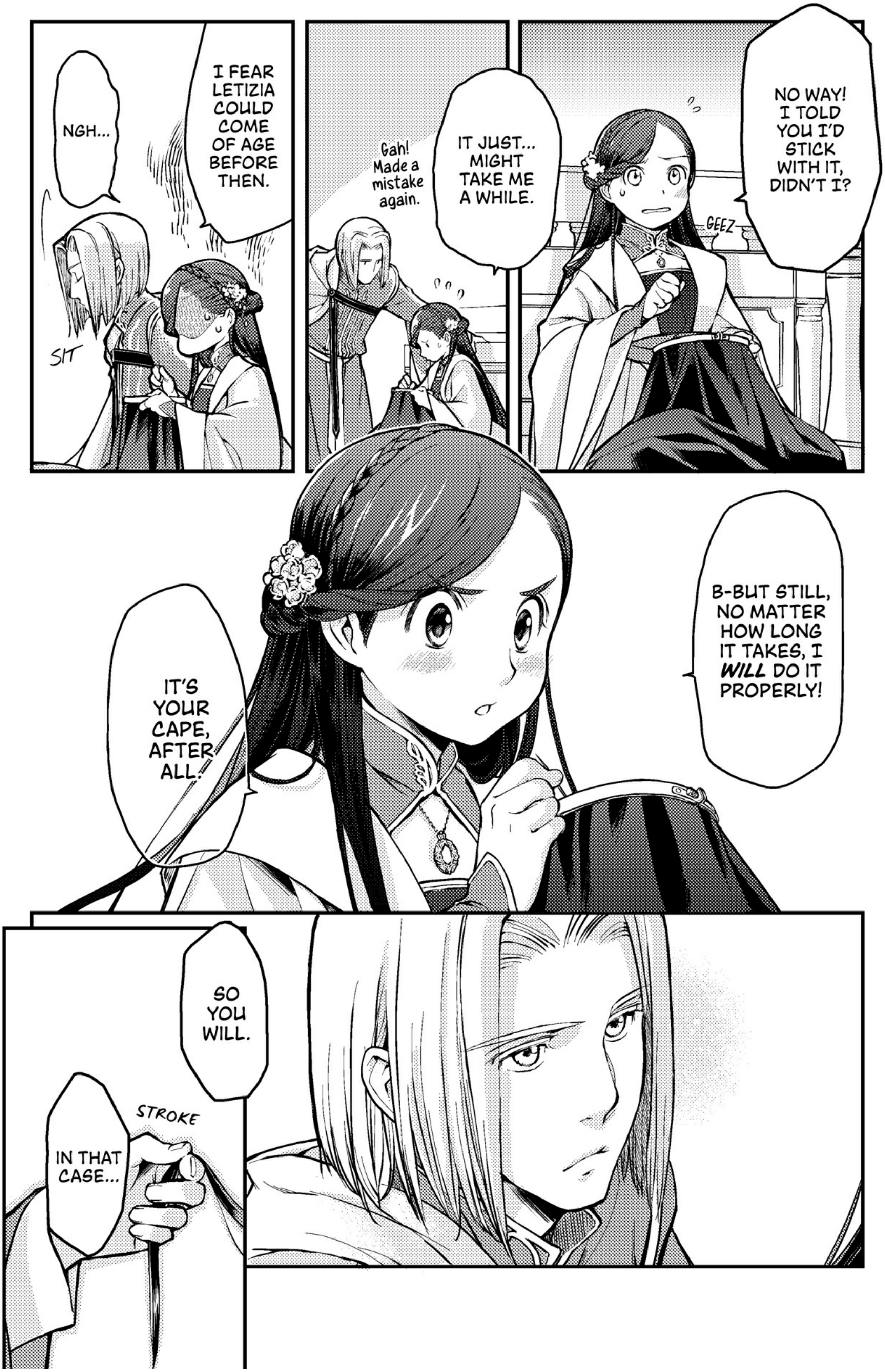
NO ONE TO STOP HER

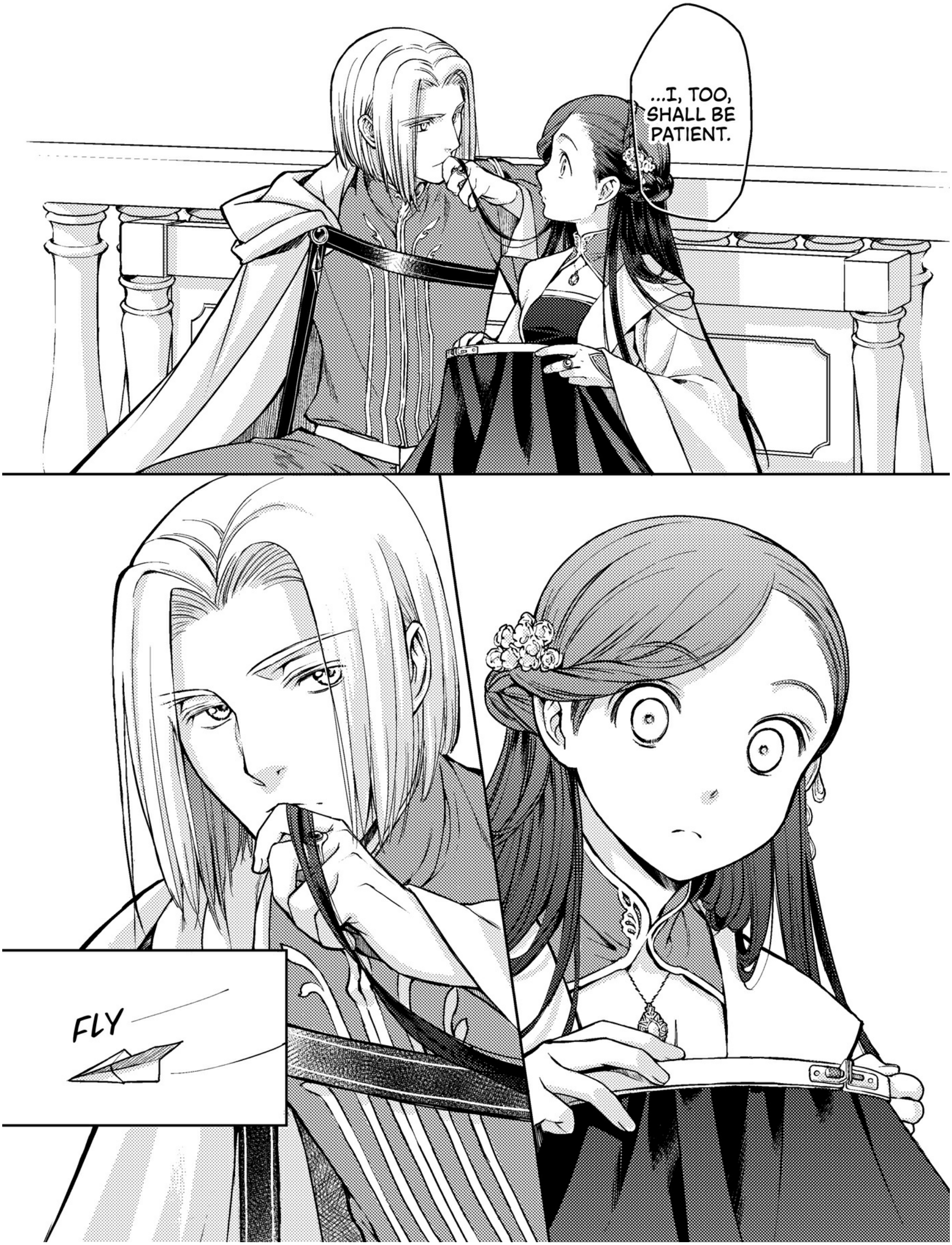

IS IT JUST ME, OR IS FERDINAND SOFTER ON MYNE THAN HE USED TO BE...?
Kamiiil! Heh heh -heh!
Wah! Aah!
myne's the same as always, though.
STEP STEP
INSTINCTUAL ESCORTING
STAND
SIT
LUTZ THUS WORRIED THERE WAS NO LONGER ANYONE TO STOP MYNE'S RAMPAGES.
AAH! THAT'S SWEET! WAY TOO SWEET!

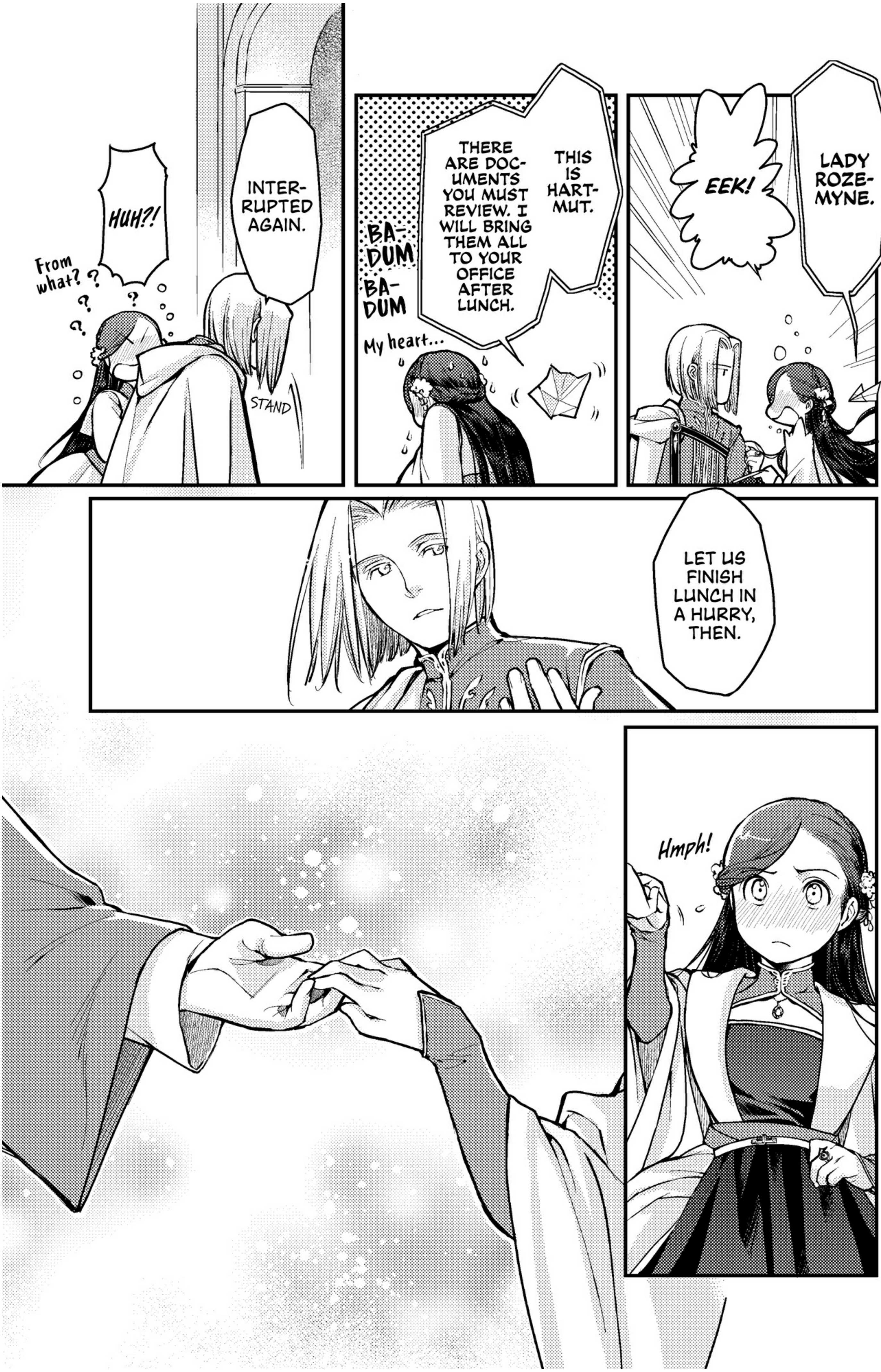
BIRDS OF A FEATHER

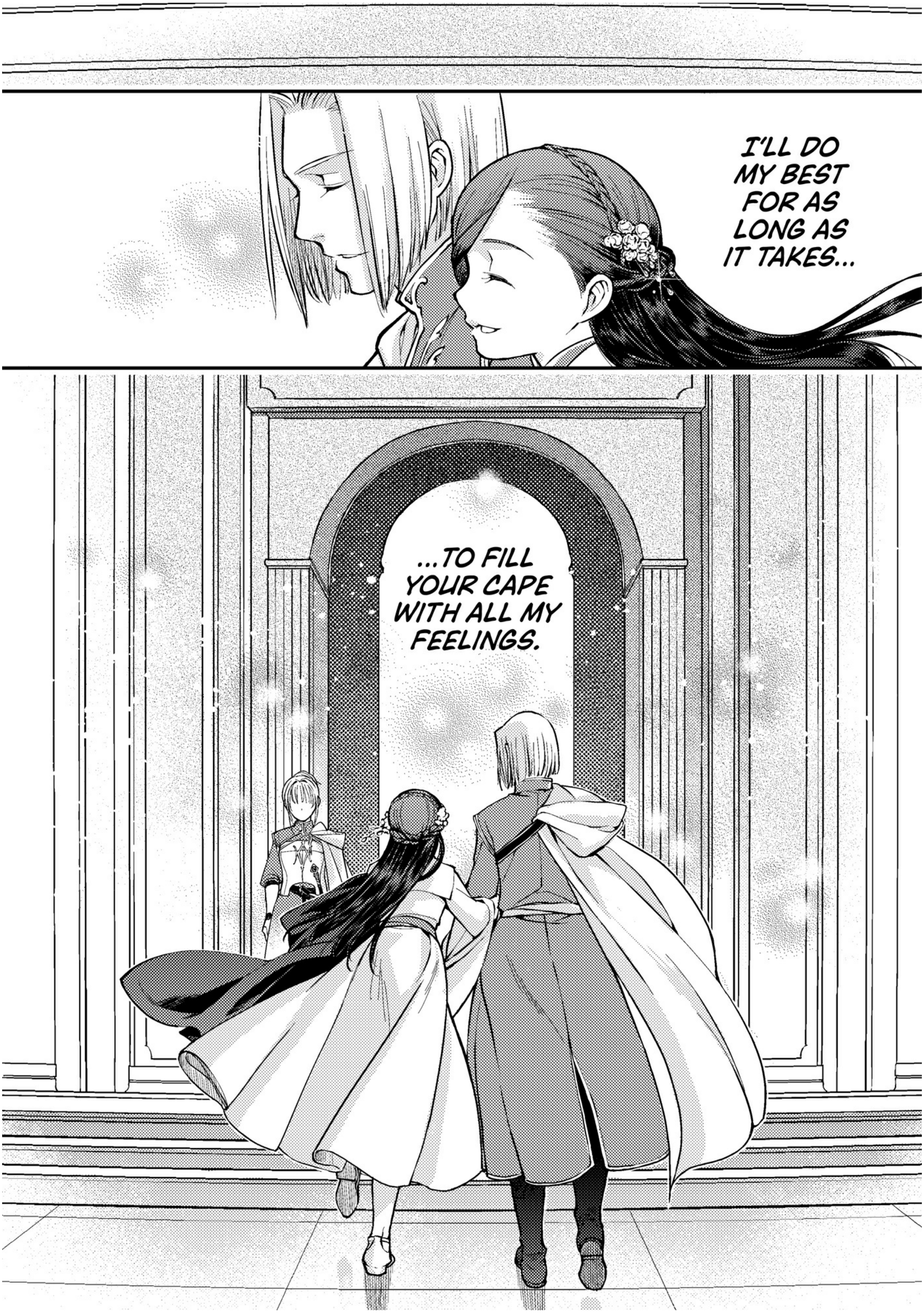

WHEN YOU'RE SET ON HAVING SOME-THING...
...YOU GO TO INSANE LENGTHS TO GET IT, DON'T YOU?
OF COURSE. HOW WOULD YOU REACT IF I SAID YOU COULD NEVER READ OR MAKE ANOTHER BOOK?
I WOULD TEAR THAT DECREE TO SHREDS...
...AND MAKE YOU VOW NEVER TO CROSS ME AGAIN.
DUN DUN D
N DUN DUN
WIGGLE
WIGGLE
NGH...
AND YOU SAY I AM THE INSANE ONE.


WHAT BRINGS YOU OUT HERE?
EMBROIDERY.
SITTING OUT IN THE SUN MAKES IT EASIER TO SEE MY HANDS.
...
SO YOU WILL NOT GIVE UP AND ATTEMPT TO FOOL ME WITH DISAPPEARING INK?


NO WAY! I TOLD YOU I'D STICK WITH IT, DIDN'T I?
GEEZ
IT JUST... MIGHT TAKE ME A WHILE.
Gah! Made a mistake again.
I FEAR LETIZIA COULD COME OF AGE BEFORE THEN.
NGH...
SIT
B-BUT STILL, NO MATTER HOW LONG IT TAKES, I *WILL* DO IT PROPERLY!
IT'S YOUR CAPE, AFTER ALL.
SO YOU WILL.
STROKE
IN THAT CASE...


...I, TOO, SHALL BE PATIENT.
FLY


LADY ROZEMYNE.
EEK!
THIS IS HARTMUT.
THERE ARE DOCUMENTS YOU MUST REVIEW. I WILL BRING THEM ALL TO YOUR OFFICE AFTER LUNCH.
BA-DUM BA-DUM
My heart...
INTERRUPTED AGAIN.
STAND
HUH?!
From what? ? ? ? ?
LET US FINISH LUNCH IN A HURRY, THEN.
Hmph!

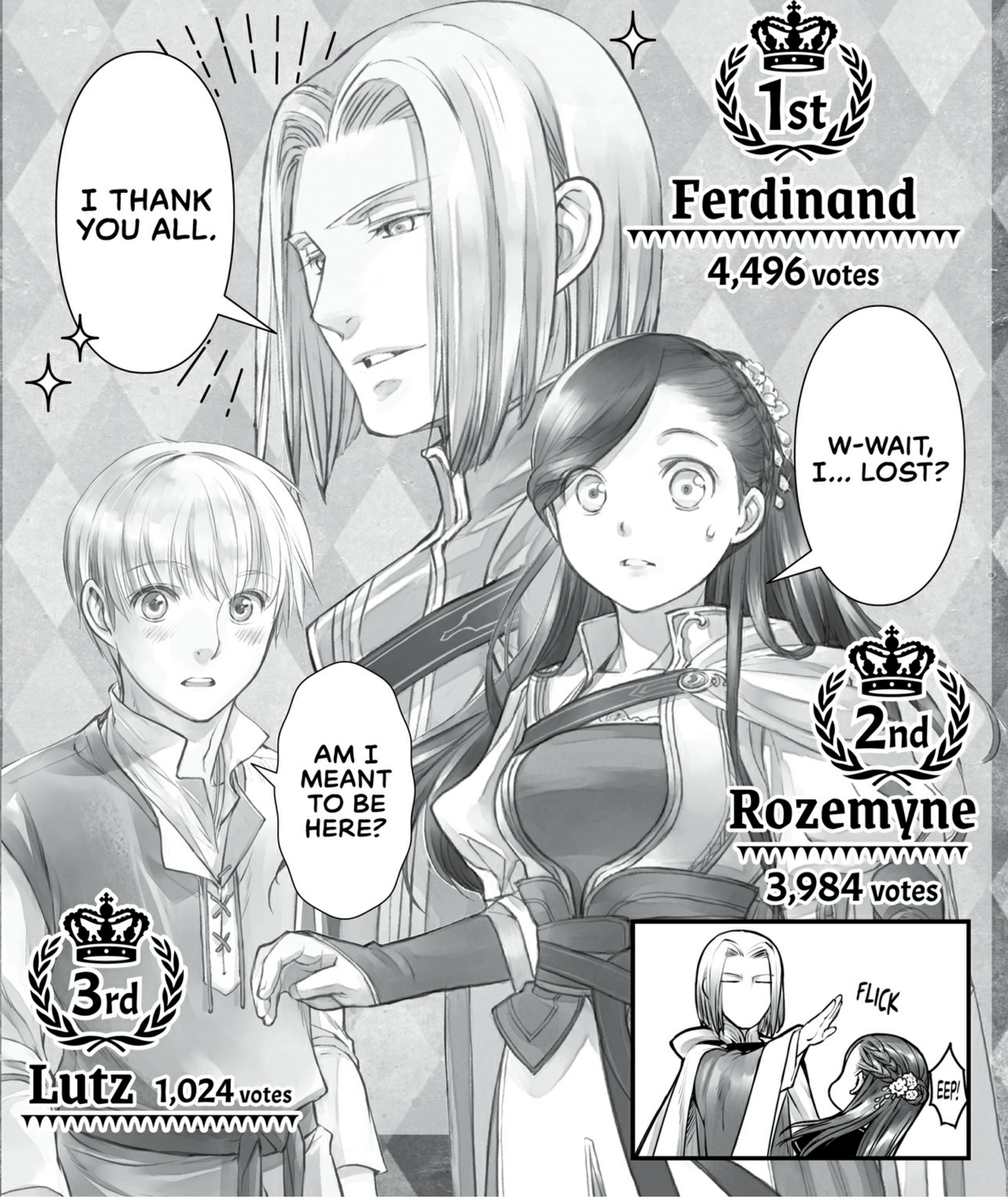

I'LL DO MY BEST FOR AS LONG AS IT TAKES...
...TO FILL YOUR CAPE WITH ALL MY FEELINGS.

The 4th ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM Character Poll!

Total number of votes: 16,639!

Celebrating the conclusion of the series! Our winner reclaims the throne by beating out the protagonist at the last moment. This gives them two wins each, a clear sign of their enduring popularity with readers!

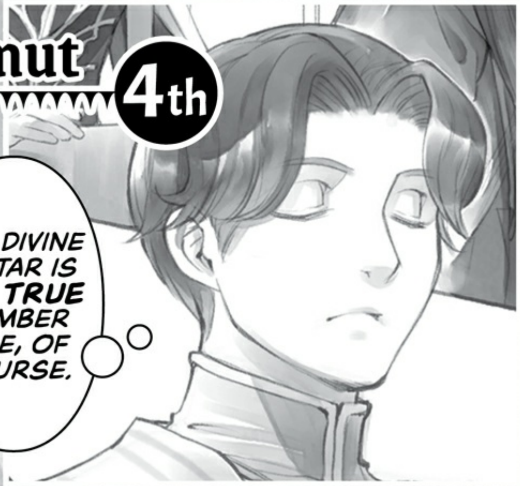
*This poll was held from August 25th to September 25th of 2023 on TO Books' home page.


W-WAIT, I... LOST?
I THANK YOU ALL.
AM I MEANT TO BE HERE?
FLICK
EEP!

1st **Ferdinand** 4,496 votes

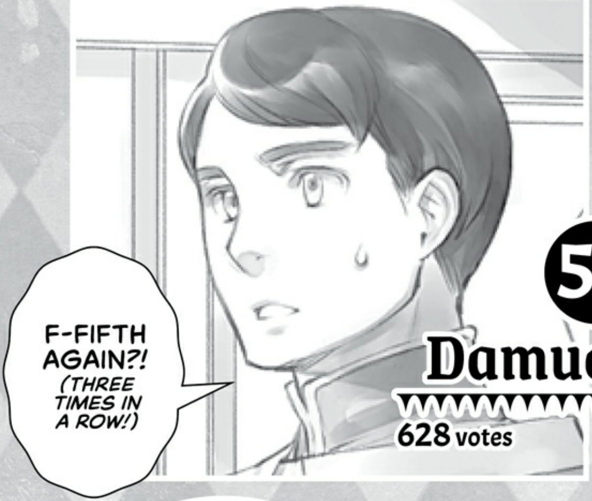
2nd **Rozemyne** 3,984 votes

3rd **Lutz** 1,024 votes


THE DIVINE AVATAR IS THE TRUE NUMBER ONE, OF COURSE.

4th Hartmut

803 votes


F-FIFTH AGAIN?! (THREE TIMES IN A ROW!)

5th Damuel

628 votes

6th Angelica 545 votes

7th Hannelore 396 votes

8th Justus 387 votes

9th Benno 383 votes

10th Lieseleta 341 votes

11th	Fran	313 votes
12th	Matthias	293 votes
13th	Elvira	271 votes
14th	Cornelius	245 votes
15th	Charlotte	215 votes
16th	Sylvester	151 votes
17th	Letizia	144 votes
18th	Clarissa	139 votes
19th	Tuuli	123 votes
20th	Lestilaut	112 votes

Comment from Miya Kazuki

Ferdinand defeats the protagonist by a considerable margin and gracefully takes the top spot! He sure is popular. Rozemyne came close around the midpoint of the voting window, but she didn't quite make it. Too bad. I must admit, I was surprised to see Lutz and Elvira rank so highly when they've had so little time to shine. Lieseleta placed much higher than she did in the previous poll, which I attribute to the manga adaptation, and Damuel proved his consistency by ranking fifth yet again. Benno and Fran received a lot more votes toward the end, showing us they still have plenty of adoring fans. I thank you all for your support of each character.

Comment from You Shiina

Ferdinand beat out the protagonist and reclaimed the throne! Could you expect any less from the Lord of Evil? Lutz performed admirably as well, managing to secure an impressive third place! That may be because he's been supporting Myne since the very beginning of the series. Seeing how highly Hartmut and Angelica ranked, I can't help but wonder if people are drawn to talented weirdos. I certainly am. And of course, Damuel continues to capture readers' hearts. He always comes fifth!

Thank you all for taking part!

『本好きの下剋上』完結！

「小説家になろう」に投稿し始めて十年。
書籍化→コミカライズ→ドラマCD化→アニメ化と
メディアミックスされ、翻訳による海外展開に加えて
ジュニア文庫化もされました。
これほど広がると思っていなかったので改めて驚きます。

『本好きの下剋上』はここで
一区切りですが、アニメが
続くことも決定しましたし、
外伝や続編も予定して
います。
これからも応援
よろしくお願いします。

Kazuki

Ascendance of a Bookworm: Concluded!

Ten years have passed since I first started posting this story on Narou. It became a media mix project through the novelization, manga release, drama CDs, and anime adaptation. It also received a Junior Bunko version and made it overseas thanks to its translations. I never expected this story to spread so far. It surprises me every time I think about it.

This marks the end of *Ascendance of a Bookworm*, but we’ve locked in another season of the anime. I also have plans for more side volumes and maybe something of a continuation of the main series.

I look forward to your continued support.

Miya Kazuki

最終巻発売！
応援ありがとう!!

いなゆ

2023.

The final volume is now on sale! Thank you for your support!

You Shiina, 2023

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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 12

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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